Exploring Cross-Cultural Management-Labour Relations

A Case Study of Chinese-Invested Garment Enterprise in Myanmar



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ABSTRACT

As Chinese enterprises expand into other Asian countries, a relatively new form of cross-cultural management-labour relations is emerging in the context of Chinese expatriate managers and Asian employees. Because China and its neighbouring Asian countries are tentatively believed to be similar in terms of cultural orientations developed by scholars such as Hofstede, research on this form of management-labour relations remains underdeveloped. Examining such, this research adds a significant perspective by using legal culture as an approach to investigate the pre-learnt social constructs, culturally influenced forces, and mismatches in expectations which may contribute to tensions, while refraining from seeing culture as a monolith. This study is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted at a Chinese-invested garment factory in Myanmar, which includes participant observation of factory operations, semi-structured interviews with factory members, and document analysis. Using ethnographic methods, this study identifies important contextual variables and concepts that are explored and linked to relevant scholarship.

This study challenges the belief that Chinese and Burmese people share many 'similarities' in terms of cultural orientation. Examining the interaction between Chinese expatriate managers and Burmese workers, it argues there are subtle yet important differences in their contextually contingent perceptions, visions, and expectations — how good leadership and governance should work, how hierarchical distinctions and leader-follower distance should be maintained, and what principles

of reciprocity, fairness, and work ethic should be upheld. The cross-cultural workplace is analysed through the intersection of multi-layered individual perceptions and broader sociocultural aspects associated with traditions and historical influences. This study further examines the functions of Burmese supervisors and Chinese-Burmese interpreters, revealing their role in bridging cultural barriers, their internal tensions of engaging in established local interaction with role-based identities, and their decisions to place organisational objectives and collective interest of the factory before cohesion of relationships. It suggests their roles are constrained by the dynamics of organisational power and the social controls set by management.

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CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1970s, China's economic reforms have transformed the country into a 'world factory,' and for decades, China has been one of the world's most important investment destinations. Millions of Chinese have taken the opportunity to work with expatriate managers in foreign-invested enterprises. Intrigued by this cross-cultural context, scholars from various disciplines, such as Chen, Tjosvold, Yuan, Jackson, Bak, and Kim, have studied the work relations between foreign managers and Chinese workers.[1] Nevertheless, since the last decade, the world has witnessed a significant shift in China's path of economic development, which is now marked by a 'going out policy' of Chinese-invested enterprises and an expansion of outbound foreign direct investment.[2] The hunger for raw material supplies, global competitiveness, and geopolitical influence is driving Chinese enterprises to seek investment opportunities overseas.[3] China's private light-manufacturing industries, in face of challenges such as rising costs, regulatory reforms, and structural changes in the economy, are relocating their manufacturing line to countries with cheaper land and labour.[4]

[1] See Nancy Yi Feng Chen and Dean Tjosvold, 'Guanxi and Leader Member Relationships between American Managers and Chinese Employees: Open-Minded Dialogue as Mediator' (2007) 24 Asia Pacific Journal of Management 171; Wenli Yuan, 'Effectiveness of Communication between American and Chinese Employees in Multinational Organizations in China' (2009) XVIII Intercultural Communication Studies 188; Terence Jackson and Mette Bak, 'Foreign Companies and Chinese Workers : Employee Motivation in the People's Republic of China' (1998) 11 Journal of Organizational Change Management 282; Jaesok Kim, *Chinese Labor in a Korean Factory* (Stanford University Press 2013).
[2] John Child and Svetla Marinova, 'The Role of Contextual Combinations in the Clobalisation of Chinese Firms' (2014) 10 Management and Organization Review 347.
[3] Ching Kwan Lee, 'Raw Encounters: Chinese Managers, African Workers and the Politics of Casualization in Africa's Chinese Enclaves' (2009) 199 China Quarterly 647.
[4] Miao Zhang, Xin Xin Kong and Santha Chenayah Ramu, 'The Transformation of the Clothing Industry in China' (2016) 22 Asia Pacific Business Review 86.

When capital moves, so does the whole package of management regime, therefore such 'going out' of Chinese enterprises in a massive scale means more Chinese people than ever are relocating to other countries to work as expatriate managers. Stationed in factories, construction sites, and offices, they are bringing overseas their technical know-how, along with management approaches and systems developed from their 'home-grown' experience. The Chinese expatriate managers, influenced by their values and prior experiences, must learn to adapt to a different culture, and they often discover that their methods of management and communication are not readily transferrable to foreign contexts.[5] On the other hand, host country employees, with their own expectations originating from practices they are familiar with, are exposed to a formative environment run by Chinese managers, and they must understand an unfamiliar organisational culture and adjust their way of work to unfamiliar expectations. The difficulty of mutual adaptation is exacerbated by additional factors, such as the lack of a common language, hierarchal organisation structures, and cultural exclusion.[6]

The workplace of Chinese-run companies abroad is a labile and multifaceted site of social exchange that forms a captivating subject of research. Participants in such zone of cross-cultural encounter make meanings and construct understanding of a new

[5] Li Lin, Peter Ping Li and Hein Roelfsema, 'The Traditional Chinese Philosophies in Inter-Cultural Leadership: The Case of Chinese Expatriate Managers in the Dutch Context' (2018) 25 Cross Cultural and Strategic Management 299; Dan Wang and others, 'Exploring Cross-Cultural Skills for Expatriate Managers from Chinese Multinationals: Congruence and Contextualization' (2017) 34 Asia Pacific Journal of Management 123.

[6] Terence Jackson and Frank M Horwitz, 'Expatriation in Chinese MNEs in Africa: An Agenda for Research' (2018) 29 International Journal of Human Resource Management 1856; Cyrielle Auffray and Xiaolan Fu, 'Chinese MNEs and Managerial Knowledge Transfer in Africa: The Case of the Construction Sector in Ghana' (2015) 13 Journal of Chinese Economic and Business Studies 285.

world. In such a transnational workplace, participants are constantly negotiating and contesting different understandings of communication, assertions of identity, and professional aspirations.[7] There is a continuous interplay of different expectations rooted in culturally shaped paradigms of perceiving, knowing, and valuing. At the same time, such cross-cultural work environment is complicated by power dynamics, as organisational power drives construction of boundaries and underpins labour relations strategies in multinational corporations.[8]

My research interest grew out of the curiosity towards this under-researched form of cross-cultural workplace relations, which goes beyond the well-studied interaction between the East and West. As Ding notices, although there are many contentious aspects to the activities of Chinese investment that has received much media and policy attention, Chinese overseas companies largely remain a 'black box' in research, and he calls for research on China's overseas activities to recognise the multi-dimensionality and real-world complexity of management-labour relations and to explore how organisational strategies and employee agency interact to influence workplace dynamics.[9] In this regard, there is some existing scholarship on Chinese presence in Africa, a research area that has gained momentum in recent years. While some scholars like Tang, Jackson, Kamoche, and Siebers have placed the focus on their

[7] Salim Lakha, 'Negotiating the Transnational Workplace: Indian Computer Professionals in Australia' (2005) 26 Journal of Intercultural Studies 337.
[8] Vince Marotta, 'Intercultural Hermeneutics and the Cross-Cultural Subject' (2009) 30 Journal of Intercultural Studies 267; William N Cooke (ed), *Multinational Companies and Global Human Resource Strategies* (Quorum Books 2003).
[9] Ding Fei, 'Variegated Work Regimes of Chinese Investment in Ethiopia' (2020) 135 World Development 105049.

analysis on Chinese management practices and their impact on African employees,[10] other scholars like Lee, Sautman, and Yan have taken a more critical assessment to centre exclusively on issues such as labour resistance and racialisation.[11] There are however only a few bottom-up ethnographic studies, like the ones conducted by Giese, Driessen, Wu, and Arsene, that provide a contextualised understanding of management-labour relations in terms of interpersonal dynamics, mismatched expectations, and divergent interpretations concerning social practices.[12]

Despite the scholarly attention on Sino-African economic relations, in actuality, Africa's share is dwarfed by Chinese investment in other countries, and it is Asia that has continued to attract the largest share out of China's total outward foreign direct investment.[13] Yet, scholarly assessment of management-labour relations of Chinese investment in the contexts of Asian host countries is even more scarce. There is only a handful of empirical research examining the labour rights situation of Southeast Asian workers in Chinese companies.[14] This is probably because unlike destinations in

[10] See Tang Xiaoyang, 'Does Chinese Employment Benefit Africans? Investigating Chinese Enterprises and Their Operations in Africa' (2016) 16 African Studies Quarterly 107; Terence Jackson, 'Employment in Chinese Mines: Appraising the Dragon's Gift to Sub-Saharan Africa' (2014) 53 Human Resource Management 897; Ken Kamoche and Lisa Qixun Siebers, 'Chinese Management Practices in Kenya: Toward a Post-Colonial Critique' (2015) 26 International Journal of Human Resource Management 2718.
[11] See Lee, 'Raw Encounters: Chinese Managers, African Workers and the Politics of Casualization in Africa's Chinese Enclaves' (n 3); Barry Sautman and Yan Hairong, 'The Discourse of Racialization of Labour and Chinese Enterprises in Africa' (2016) 39 Ethnic and Racial Studies 2149.
[12] See Karsten Giese, 'Same-Same but Different: Chinese Traders' Perspectives on African Labor' (2013) 69 China Journal 134; Miriam Driessen, *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness: Chinese Road Builders in Ethiopia* (Hong Kong University Press 2019); Di Wu, *Affective Encounters: Everyday Life Among Chinese Migrants in Zambia* (Routledge 2021); Codrin Arsene, 'Chinese Employers and Their Ugandan Workers: Tensions, Frictions and Cooperation in an African City' (2014) 43 Journal of Current Chinese Affairs 139.
[13] See Badar Alam Iqbal, Shaista Sami and Abdul Turay, 'Determinants of China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment in Asia: A Panel Data Analysis' (2019) 7 Economic and Political Studies 66. Asia attracted a 74.4% share out of China's total outward foreign direct investment in 2015.
[14] See for example, Ivan Franceschini, 'As Far Apart as Earth and Sky: A Survey of Chinese and Cambodian Construction Workers in Sihanoukville' (2020) 52 Critical Asian Studies 512; Romyen Kosaikanont, 'Chinese Capital Going Global: Thai-Chinese Industrial Zone and Labor Conditions in

Africa where significant perceived 'differences' are anticipated, Chinese expatriates and people of Asian countries are assumed to be connected by more 'similarities' such as the presence of local ethnic Chinese communities. It is also assumed that investment from China has a comparative advantage of 'lower cultural risk' with other Asian countries since these countries allegedly only 'show slight cultural differences with China.'[15]

Intending to question these narratives, my research interest in management-labour relations between Chinese expatriate managers and non-Chinese employees shifts its focus from the more popular Africa to China's Asian neighbours. While I continue to emphasise 'differences,' I also examine perceived 'similarities' between parties in East meets East encounter to see if the 'similarities' are actually similar, and if there are 'differences' that are generally too subtle and elusive to notice.

1. Setting Research Question

Most studies of management-labour relations in the tradition of organisation and conflict resolution scholarship tend to focus on industrial conflict. In general, scholars are interested in the nature and process of conflict, the ways in which organisational environment can be modified to reduce conflict, and the influence of the broader social

Thailand' in Yos Santasombat (ed), *The Sociology of Chinese Capitalism in Southeast Asia* (Palgrave Macmillan 2018).

[15] Linjing Dang and Jingfeng Zhao, 'Cultural Risk and Management Strategy for Chinese Enterprises' Overseas Investment' (2020) 61 China Economic Review 101433.

context on conflict resolution. Whereas, in labour studies, the usual focus is on the socio-economic factors contributing to management-labour conflicts, management control over labour processes, and the framework for conflict negotiation. The focus of some approaches is on the political processes resulting from power relations in an organisation. Although I make reference to ideas found in both of these fields, I argue that their analyses have not adequately considered the cultural dimensions of organisational dynamics. Cultural diversity is becoming increasingly prevalent in our workplaces; therefore, management-labour relations need to be contextualised in order to understand the cultural elements and the interaction of different values, perceptions, and behaviours.

In scholarship about cross-cultural encounter, a popular approach is to understand culture as a sum of traits based on dimensions, such as collectivism vs. individualism and masculinity vs. femininity derived from the seminal works of Hofstede.[16] Using this approach of quantifying national cultures, scholars assess 'cultural distance' — degree to which the culture of one country differs from or is similar to that of another country. [17] A considerable body of research implicitly assumes a theoretical positioning that, increasing cultural distance between the host and the home culture, that is, dissimilarity between cultures, will influence difficulties in adjustment, likelihood of maladaptation, and means of conflict management.[18]

[16] Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* (Sage Publications 1980).
[17] Oded Shenkar, 'Revisited : And Conceptualization Measurement Cultural' (2001) 32 Journal of International Business Studies 519.
[18] See Ying Zhang, Xialing Wei and Wei Zhou, 'An Asymmetric Cross-Cultural Perspective on the Mediating Role of Conflict Management Styles in Expatriation' (2017) 28 International Journal of Conflict Management 592. For some examples, see Aparna Joshi, Giuseppe Labianca and Paula M

However, when culture is viewed as the aggregated macro dimensions, such a static, essentialist, and a-contextual approach strips individuals of their multiple identities, neglects their agency, and understands them as if they are all driven by their national culture to act in the same manner.[19] It overly emphasises the need to define observed behaviour with predetermined categories and expects people to behave consistently throughout all situations. Does this understanding of culture as static values hold true in the real world? As Swidler argue, it is more realistic to take a nuanced view of culture, understanding it to be contextually contingent symbolic vehicles, such as beliefs, practices, and rituals, through which people express meaning and conduct social processes.[20] At a zone of cross-cultural encounter, participants' understandings, expectations, and behaviours are shaped by the social context in which they are produced, examined, and reflected through interactions.

So, if we only use cultural assumptions to analyse individual behaviour, it is likely that we will fail to recognise the nuances, in particular the subtle differences within the dynamics of an East meets East site of encounter involving Chinese expatriate supervisors and non-Chinese Asian subordinates. Putting this into perspective, I decided that my research should refrain from relying extensively on assumptions

Caligiuri, 'Getting along Long Distance: Understanding Conflict in a Multinational Team through Network Analysis' (2002) 37 Journal of World Business 277; Frances P Brew and David R Cairns, 'Do Culture or Situational Constraints Determine Choice of Direct or Indirect Styles in Intercultural Workplace Conflicts?' (2004) 28 International Journal of Intercultural Relations 331.

[19] Irina Lyan, '"Koreans Are the Israelis of the East": A Postcolonial Reading of Cultural Similarities in Cross-Cultural Management' (2021) 27 Culture and Organization 507.

[20] Ann Swidler, 'Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies' (1986) 51 American Sociological Review 273.

based on national cultures. To analyse the intricacies in workplace dynamics, it is imperative to capture the specificity of the social context, to expose how people attribute meanings to particular social interactions. I investigate how groups of people make sense of workplace dynamics with their ideas and visions, and what problems occur when they are brought together in a setting of foreign direct investment.

Tensions in work relationships may emerge as the result of a variety of factors, such as competing economic interests, regulatory compliance issues, and other social factors. In my research, I focus on unveiling the contextual mismatch in expectations and behavioural patterns as the contributing factor to tensions in a cross-cultural work environment. The aim of my study is to apply an appropriate lens to identify the underlying content of differences across cultural boundaries by examining the tensions. Recognising that the dynamics of management-labour relations in a Chinese-managed cross-cultural work environment are very complex and comprise many factors, my research question is: What are the culturally shaped forces and mismatches in expectations that contribute to tensions and shape the dynamics of such a work environment?

I conduct this study with an understanding that although there is always the possibility that misunderstandings and frictions may develop into full-blown conflicts, it is still relatively rare for an organisation to experience repeated labour disputes that proceed to institutions such as tribunals and courts or escalate to industrial action. Typically, conflicts at work revolve around subtle tensions and grievances, which can

be latent and even unexpressed. In this regard, the law and institutions play a minimal role. To paint a vivid and detailed picture of cross-cultural workplace relations requires more than a study of overt forms of industrial conflict in a legal framework. We need to carefully observe the actual work environment and unveil the conflicting values at play.

For this reason, socio-legal methodological approaches are appropriate for studying management-labour relations. Social-legal research looks beyond the full-blown industrial conflicts and formal dispute resolution mechanisms to the informal domain of grievances, complaints, and tensions. In order to scrutinise the object of study, in my case the dynamics of management-labour relations between Chinese managers and non-Chinese employees, I use 'legal culture' as an approach. This interpretative approach, as a methodological option in the socio-legal field, helps me to identify the nuances, and, in turn, describe how these differences manifest themselves in daily work situations. This approach looks at cross-cultural encounters by inquiring how people relate to the work environment, how they experience cross-cultural interactions, and how they deal with differences in understandings. It embraces a qualitative and interaction-oriented account that emphasises differences in the form of perceptions, visions, and expectations exchanged between people. While other sociodemographic variables such as gender and class provide valuable lenses for analysing management-labour relations, legal culture as a contextual framework invites my research to investigate and interpret work relationships as perceived by participants, making it possible to explore much deeper layers of perception and

meaning than are typically neglected. Using this framework guides my specific choices and questions when investigating the interplay between different attitudes and behaviours in the cross-cultural work environment.

Since my approach provides a lens to spot and interpret visions manifested in cross-cultural interactions, I am also interested in tracing the roots of such. In order to conduct a comprehensive analysis of people's understandings, they must be placed within a larger context. For this purpose, I analyse my observations through exploring the intersection of multiple layers of individual perceptions and broader socio-cultural factors associated with traditions and historical influences. I have been able to generate new insights for explanation by juxtaposing observable practices with knowledge of the broader context while remaining relatively unbiased towards the stereotypical assumptions about people of different nationalities.

2. Investigative Approach

There are many types of overseas Chinese investment projects, but for the purpose of my research, I am interested in management-labour relations in manufacturing environments, since factory managers are constantly monitoring activities and interacting with workers to ensure a smooth production process. People from different cultures come into close contact regularly on the factory shop floors, which is why there are many instances in which perspectives differ and tensions may develop.

In order to better detect and make sense of nuances in the workplace, I conducted ethnographic research at the cross-cultural work environment of 'Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd,' a Chinese-invested garment factory in Myanmar. According to studies of cultural orientations, China and Myanmar are considered 'similar' Asian countries in some respects, for instance, they both score highly on the individualism-collectivism dimension identified by Hofstede, which suggests they are both collectivist cultures.[21] It is therefore intriguing to examine the interaction between Chinese expatriate managers and Burmese workers to see whether there is any significant amount of overlap between their individual attitudes and behaviours.

During my ethnographic fieldwork in which close and frequent observations were made, I became sensitive to the forms of mismatch in expectations and behaviours. As I had anticipated before fieldwork, such forms of mismatch rarely evolved into major industrial conflicts. After scrutinising the work environment, spotting the tensions, and exploring relationships between Chinese managers and Burmese workers, I extrapolated from my ethnographic observations and identified the nuances unique to this cross-cultural environment. As I reflected on my findings and developed my analysis, I came up with a number of significant core concepts which were placed in relevant academic scholarship.

[21] Hofstede (n 16); Alana Rudkin and Joseph Erba, 'Myanmar's Cultural Dimensions: Exploring the Relationship among the Social Identity, Attitudes towards Globalisation and Preferences of Myanmar Consumers in Yangon' (2018) 14 International Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies 191.

According to the findings, people had different expectations and ideas regarding workplace management, relations at work, and grievance handling, which come close to the concepts of leadership, conflict management, communication, and regulatory enforcement behaviour. Scholars have analysed these behaviours and theorised them into categories. For instance, Lewin, Lippitt, and White sorted leadership behaviour into autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire styles,[22] Thomas and Kilman identified conflict management approaches as classified by dimensions of assertiveness and cooperativeness, [23] and Hall theorised communication along dimensions of high-context and low-context.[24] Kelman classified enforcement behaviour into adversarial and cooperative styles,[25] and Bardach and Kagan conceptualised such based on dimensions of formalism and coercion.[26] The findings of my research, however, challenge the popular belief about Chinese and Burmese people sharing 'similarities' in their cultural orientations and behavioural styles, since there are differences in their contextually shaped perceptions, visions, and expectations. Whereas scholarship suggests that Chinese and Burmese people are accustomed to autocratic leadership

[22] Kurt Lewin, Ronald Lippitt and Ralph K. White, 'Patterns of Aggressive Behavior in Experimentally Created "Social Climates"' (1939) 10 Journal of Social Psychology 271; see also J Kevin Barge, *Leadership : Communication Skills for Organizations & Groups* (St Martin's Press 1994).
[23] Kenneth W Thomas, 'Conflict and Conflict Management: Reflections and Update' (1992) 13 Journal of Organizational Behavior 265; Robert R Blake and Jane S Mouton, *The Managerial Grid* (Gulf Publishing 1994); Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann, *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* (Xicom 1974).
[24] Edward Twitchell Hall, *Beyond Culture* (Anchor 1989); Donghoon Kim, Yigang Pan and Heung Soo Park, 'High- Versus Low-Context Culture: A Comparison of Chinese, Korean, and American Cultures' (1998) 15 Psychology and Marketing 507.
[25] Steven Kelman, *Regulating America, Regulating Sweden: A Comparative Study of Occupational Health and Safety* (The MIT Press, 1981); Eugene Bardach and Robert A Kagan, *Going by the Book: The Problem of Regulatory Unreasonableness* (Transaction Publishers, 2002)
[26] Peter J May and Søren Winter, 'Regulatory Enforcement and Compliance: Examining Danish Agro-Environmental Policy' (1999) 18 Journal of Policy Analysis and Management 625.

styles and relation-oriented work behaviour,[27] this study discusses the differences in the ways Chinese managers and Burmese workers thought about good leadership and effective governance.

In the workplace, people held contrasting views regarding how hierarchical order should operate according to roles. Many researchers are of the opinion that Asian cultures are characterised by a normative acceptance of hierarchical inequalities and conformity with role expectations, given that status is closely linked to one's role in an organisation.[28] Despite both the Chinese and Burmese are said to be similarly ranked high in the individualism-collectivism and power distance dimensions identified by Hofstede,[29] the study identifies that the Chinese managers and Burmese workers had different internalised views on hierarchical specifics and leader-follower distance.

People at the site also thought about fairness and justice in different ways. In this regard, several concepts have been developed, including distributive, procedural, and interactional justice. Researchers like Lee, Pillutla, and Law have identified cross-

[27] Lian Kual Sang and Jeff Fang, 'Leadership Style of Myanmar Hotel Managers: Culture as a Hindrance in Moving towards Democratic/Participatory Style from Autocratic Style' (2019) 2 International Journal of Knowledge Management in Tourism and Hospitality 180; Alexander Dukalskis, *The Authoritarian Public Sphere: Legitimation and Autocratic Power in North Korea, Burma, and China* (Routledge 2017).

[28] Harry C Triandis and Michele J Gelfand, 'Converging Measurement of Horizontal and Vertical Individualism and Collectivism' (1998) 74 Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 118; Ko Kuwabara and others, 'Status Decreases Dominance in the West but Increases Dominance in the East' (2016) 27 Psychological Science 127.

[29] Helen Spencer-Oatey, 'Unequal Relationships in High and Low Power Distance Societies: A Comparative Study of Tutor-Student Role Relations in Britain and China' (1997) 28 Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology 284; P Christopher Earley, *Face, Harmony, & Social Structure: An Analysis of Organizational Behavior across Cultures* (Oxford University Press 1997).

cultural differences in how justice exerts influence, and they have demonstrated that 'cultural orientations' can moderate the relationship between justice perceptions and employee outcomes.[30] Considering how these concepts are often developed from a Western perspective, this study discusses fairness and justice behaviour in terms of actual observable differences between Chinese managers and Burmese workers in their understanding of how reciprocity should be practised, what fairness is, and what work ethic means.

At the cross-cultural workplace, there were bicultural Chinese-Burmese interpreters and Burmese supervisors who fulfilled the role as 'people in between.' In scholarship, Eversole for example identifies 'cultural brokers' as people who enable communication across divides and play mediation roles.[31] 'Interpreter,' on the other hand, is commonly understood as people who provide accurate translation and remain impartial.[32] Referring to these cultural intermediary roles, this study supports the notion that the 'people in between' play an active and enabling role in the bridging of cultural barriers at the cross-cultural workplace. However, it also reveals that in taking on that role, they had internalised some of the Chinese managers' work norms and practices. As a result of the conflict between their role-based identity and established local relationships, they experienced internal tensions and tried to strike a balance between imposition of Chinese work practices and maintaining close

[30] Cynthia Lee, Madan Pillutla and Kenneth S Law, 'Power-Distance, Gender and Organizational Justice' (2000) 26 Journal of Management 685.
[31] Robyn Eversole, 'Cultural Brokers' in Hilary Callan (ed), *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (Wiley-Blackwell 2018).
[32] Nancy Schweda Nicholson, 'Professional Ethics for Court and Community Interpreters' in Deanna L Hammond (ed), *Professional Issues for Translators and Interpreters* (John Baenjamins Publishing 1994).

relationships with Burmese workers. Even so, at critical moments they had to put organisational objectives and the collective interest of the factory ahead of individual workers' entitlements. Ultimately, the study suggests that their role is constrained by the dynamics of organisational power and the social controls imposed by the management.

3. Outline of Chapters

The second chapter, '*Analytical Framework*,' explains the analytical approach for this research with a review of the existing literature. It discusses the research traditions of management-labour relations, of which the focus is usually on organisational structure, work conditions, and trade unionism, and it suggests that there is insufficient consideration of the cultural aspects of organisational dynamics. It then describes the common approach of using 'culture' as a definable and measurable conceptual framework, presents the core problematic assumptions of such an approach, and explains the approach in this research, which is to use 'culture' as the methodological lens to scrutinise the object of enquiry and pose the particular types of questions. Based on the themes and concepts that emerged through the process of data analysis, this chapter furthermore reviews the discussion in scholarship of various disciplines.

The third chapter, '*Research Setting and Methodology*,' outlines the general background of this project, providing insight into the nature of the relationships prevailing and

placing them in context with what was happening in the study site. The chapter illustrates Myanmar's long-standing economic ties with China, its business environment for foreign investment, and its institutional dispute resolution mechanisms which I suggest are useful only for a tiny fraction of overt and contentious industrial disputes. The chapter provides a detailed description of the site studied in this project. It also explains the ethnographic methodology of this research, in particular the techniques used for data generation which includes participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, and provides an account of my personal experience in the field and the various challenges I faced in the process. The chapter furthermore describes the method of data generation which is based on the grounded theory approach, and the logic of the analysis.

The fourth chapter, '*The Chinese-Managed Multicultural Workplace,*' provides an overview of Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd, the Chinese-invested factory where the fieldwork for this research project was conducted. First, it describes the organisational structure and production process. It then discusses the practices, strategies, and systems used in the factory to overcome challenges, facilitate cross-cultural communication, and enable effective management of production activities. Finally, the chapter describes the various mechanisms of grievance management and dispute resolution, both institutionalised and non-institutionalised, overt and covert, that were used by members of the factory.

The next four chapters comprise the empirical core of this thesis. As the first core empirical chapter, this fifth chapter of this thesis, '*Contrasting Perceptions of Leadership and Governance,*' explains how 'cultural difference' in the straightforward sense, such as religion and language, does not appear to be a significant barrier in the cross-cultural work environment. With examples, the chapter illustrates some of the main findings of this research, which are the different visions and expectations held by Chinese managers and Burmese workers in relation to the idea of what good leadership should look like. Follow from that, it discusses and compares different conceptions of workplace rules as the appropriate means of governance and control, engaging scholarship to bring different concepts to interpret the findings.

The sixth chapter, '*Contrasting Models of Social Order*,' discusses and compares the visions of hierarchy of Chinese managers and Burmese workers. It centres around how they think about the appropriate format of hierarchy arrangements and hierarchical distance between leaders and followers. With reference to scholarship, the factory members' ideal models of hierarchical order are analysed as the reflection of historical and socio-cultural influences. Throughout the chapter, there is discussion on the tensions resulting from contrasting ideas and expectations about what hierarchical order should look like.

The seventh chapter, '*Contrasting Principles of Reciprocity, Fairness, and Work Ethic*,' begins by discussing a workplace incident involving bonus distribution to illustrate how understandings of the principles and practices of reciprocity may be different

between Chinese managers and Burmese workers. It then discusses the contrasting ideas of fairness expressed by the two groups, and their respective attitudes towards differential treatment of workers. This is followed by a discussion of work ethic from different perspectives, of which the Chinese managers' work-related expectations are contrasted with the Burmese workers' feelings of entitlement towards employee benefits and work arrangements. The chapter furthermore suggests that such ideas about reciprocity, fairness, and work ethic are linked to specific socio-cultural, economic, and historical factors.

The last empirical chapter, '*The People in Between,*' explores the roles of the Burmese supervisors and Chinese-Burmese interpreters in the site, particularly how they weighed their job responsibility to the Chinese management against their relationships and sense of belonging to the Burmese. It shows that the Burmese supervisors were acculturated into some management norms of the Chinese managers, while trying to maintain a close sense of identification with the frontline workers. It then turns towards the Chinese-Burmese interpreters, to first describe their bicultural background and distinct sense of identity, then detail their experiences of spanning cultural and intraorganisational boundaries to function as the engine of the work environment, and finally uncover their strategies to contain workers' dissatisfactions and maintain workplace stability on behalf of the Chinese management.

The final chapter, '*Conclusion*,' answers the research questions of this thesis and describes the research implications. It sets out the conclusions and implications drawn

from the empirical findings and discusses the contribution of this thesis to existing literature. The chapter ends with some suggestions for the directions of future inquiries.

CHAPTER TWO - ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, I present the analytical framework of this thesis. I first discuss the research traditions on management-labour relations and explain how an emphasis on cultural element within an organisation contributes a new perspective. Then I discuss the problems associated with using culture as a concept in cross-cultural management research, and I explain how I instead use culture as an approach to scrutinise the object of study and ask specific questions. Afterwards, I discuss the concepts and categories arising from my data analysis and elaborate on how these concepts are understood and discussed in scholarship of various disciplines. Last, I discuss the ideas of cultural brokers and intermediaries. With reference to these concepts, my study illustrates the role played by supervisors and interpreters, given the importance of their presence in the field site.

1. Theoretical Framework

1.1 Management-Labour Relations Research

The study of organisations and management-labour relations probably dates back to the early twentieth century, when industrial conflict was identified in the booming economy as 'inefficiency' created by division between employers and employees.[33] Taylor, the proponent of 'scientific management,' argued with an institutional focus

[33] Alan Tidwell, *Conflict Resolved?: A Critical Assessment of Conflict Resolution* (A&C Black 2001).

that organisations should put the 'system' before the 'man,' and to improve management-labour relations is to focus on organisational systems such as incentives and training.[34] Emerging out of this concern, a tradition of organisation and conflict resolution scholarship is to study management-labour conflicts as threats to organisational efficiency, with the perception of organisations as instrumental, goal-directed collectivities governed by formal procedures. [35] As identified by Morrill and Rudes, studies following this line of reasoning typically see management-labour conflicts as resulting from opposed goals, interests, values, beliefs, and feelings, that intra-organisational antagonism can be resolved or prevented through optimising organisational structure and design.[36] Scholars are interested to know what conflicts exist between interests, and more importantly, how should institutions be configured to minimise these conflicts.[37] For example, scholars like Mayo and Barnard in their seminal works argue that organisations should be engineered to become a collaborative environment directed towards organisational goals, and a more delegating and responsive leadership style would reconciliate conflicting forces, maintain dynamic equilibrium, and prevent management-labour conflict.[38] Lawrence and Lorsch have discussed how the ability of organisations to address conflicts is

[34] Frederick Winslow Taylor, *Shop Management* (Harper and brothers 1919); Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (Harper and brothers 1913); Sigmund Wagner-Tsukamoto, 'An Institutional Economic Reconstruction of Scientific Management: On the Lost Theoretical Logic of Taylorism' (2007) 32 Academy of Management Review 105.
[35] Calvin Morrill and Danielle S Rudes, 'Conflict Resolution in Organizations' (2010) 6 Annual Review of Law and Social Science 627.
[36] ibid.
[37] Blair H Sheppard, 'Conflict Research as Schizophrenia: The Many Faces of Organizational Conflict' (1992) 13 Journal of Organizational Behavior 325.
[38] Elton Mayo, *The Early Sociology of Management and Organizations* (Routledge 1933); Chester Barnard, *The Functions of the Executive* (Harvard University Press 1968).

dependent on effective integration of subsystems that possess different structures, goals, norms, and orientations.[39]

Some other scholars researching organisational conflict resolution have turned their interest to the influence of broader social context on conflict resolution, rather than focusing only on the organisational environment. Sezlnick argue that the formal organisational structure of delegation and control is only an aspect of a concrete social structure made up of individuals who interact as wholes.[40] Studies have demonstrated how social hierarchies, social networks, and other social factors influence the process of disputing in organisations, and as identified by Morrill and Rudes, these studies tend to emphasise the informal, behind-the-scenes processes of disputes, such as avoidance, lumping, or on-the-fly negotiations, rather than either ADR or legal intervention.[41] For example, Miller and Sarat argue that the willingness to label events as grievances is affected by statuses, relationships, educational levels, and legal contacts,[42] and Gwartney-Gibbs and Lach argue that gender roles and sex segregation in work are related to the origin, process, and outcome of workplace disputes.[43] All in all, the point of departure of scholarship in this respect is the nature and process of conflicts within organisations.

[39] Paul R Lawrence and Jay W Lorsch, 'Differentiation and Integration in Complex Organizations' (1967) 12 Administrative Science Quarterly 1.
[40] Philip Selznick, 'Foundations of the Theory of Organization' (1948) 13 American Sociological Review 25.
[41] Morrill and Rudes (n 35).
[42] Richard E Miller and Austin Sarat, 'Grievances, Claims, and Disputes: Assessing the Adversary Culture' (1980) 15 Law and Society Review 525.
[43] Patricia A Gwartney-gibbs and Denise H Lach, 'Gender and Workplace Dispute Resolution: A Conceptual and Theoretical Model' (1994) 28 Law and Society Review 265.

While organisational conflict resolution scholarship looks to the organisational system and informal disputing process as the basis of their being, research takes a different perspective in labour studies scholarship, of which the usual interest is in the sources leading to management-labour conflicts, management control over labour process, and process of negotiating conflicts like unionism and bargaining. Marxian precepts have informed studies to assess the root of management-labour conflict as based on the conflict between classes within production relationships, which is expressed in the dialectic between business strategies and worker resistances.[44] Polanyi similarly used the concepts of class interest and class conflicts, seeing class as the social construction of rank, status, and security that gives people shared moral values and meanings to sustain the reproduction of a socioeconomic system.[45]

Some scholars are more interested in the labour process rather than socio-economic factors. They direct attention to the every-day directed and regulated work environments of which there are often coercion and limited worker responsibility.[46] This perspective traces its roots to people looking to understand the modes of domination that shape work process and drive workers to exert themselves, given that the root of conflicts is understood to be based on the absence of stable agreement between worker and employer over the quantity and quality of labour power that can

[44] Loris Caruso, 'Between Marx and Polanyi: New Labour Mobilisations in the Italian Crisis' (2015) 39 Capital and Class 345; Rodrigo M Medel, Diego Velásquez and Domingo Pérez, 'Politization in Labor Conflict: Analyzing the Demands of Post-Authoritarian Chilean Strikes' [2021] Critical Sociology.
[45] Karina Becker, Klaus Dörre and Yalcin Kutlu, 'Counter-Landnahme? Labour Disputes in the Care-Work Field' (2018) 37 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion 361; João Rodrigues, 'Endogenous Preferences and Embeddedness: A Reappraisal of Karl Polanyi' (2004) 38 Journal of Economic Issues 189.
[46] Chris Smith, 'Continuity and Change in Labor Process Analysis Forty Years After Labor and Monopoly Capital' (2015) 40 Labor Studies Journal 222.

be expended.[47] Gramsci argues that workers through their lived experience are persuaded to passively tolerate and actively consent to capitalist hegemony.[48] Through granting concessions to workers, such as trade unions shaped by industrial capitalism, capitalists turn potential conflicts into compromise and cooperation.[49] For Bourdieu, workers' propensity to obey is the result of their inculcated habitus, the endless capacity to engender thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and actions.[50] Workers' habitus drives workers to adjust expectations in conflict-laden situations and induce submission to management. Recognising the importance of consent mechanisms, Burawoy argues that by providing workers with things like limited job control, piece-rate payment, and concession bargaining, management attempts to constitute workers as individuals with rights to inculcate a sense of their interests being tied to organisational success.[51] Despite workers' feelings of participation and agency, management controls work relations through collective agreement and grievance machinery which operates to protect management's prerogative.[52]

[47] Paul Thompson and Chris Smith, 'Waving, Not Drowning: Explaining and Exploring the Resilience of Labor Process Theory' (2009) 21 Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal 253; Kaxton Siu, *Chinese Migrant Workers and Employer Domination: Comparisons with Hong Kong and Vietnam* (Palgrave Macmillan 2020).

[48] Michael Burawoy, 'The Roots of Domination: Beyond Bourdieu and Gramsci' (2012) 46 Sociology 187; Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (International Publishers 1971).

[49] Maurizio Atzeni, 'Workers' Organizations and the Fetishism of the Trade Union Form: Toward New Pathways for Research on the Labour Movement?' (2021) 18 Globalizations 1349.

[50] Burawoy, 'The Roots of Domination: Beyond Bourdieu and Gramsci' (n 48); Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge University Press 1977).

[51] Michael Burawoy, 'Between the Labor Process and the State: The Changing Face of Factory Regimes Under Advanced Capitalism' (1983) 48 American Sociological Review 587; Michael Burawoy and Erik Olin Wright, 'Coercion and Consent in Contested Exchange' (1990) 18 Politics and Society 251; Michael Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism* (University of Chicago Press 1979).

[52] Michael Burawoy, 'Ethnographic Fallacies: Reflections on Labour Studies in the Era of Market Fundamentalism' (2013) 27 Work, Employment and Society 526.

Some other approaches centre attention on the 'political' processes resulting from the 'power games' between actors in an organisation. Framework of negotiation and negotiation-like interaction between actors in industrial relations are the thematic focus. For example, Walton and McKersie have drawn attention to the negotiation 'sub-processes,' defining negotiations as a social interaction system and identifying the multifunctionality of negotiations in achieving consensus.[53] As Kochan, Katz, and McKersie have elaborated, there is a three-tier institutional structure which recognises the interrelatedness of activities at varying levels of the system, so that below the level of strategic decisions are the levels of collective bargaining, below which are the levels of the workplace and the individual.[54]

Compared with organisational conflict resolution and industrial relations scholarship, my research takes a 'culture' perspective and tries to understand the variables or aspects of cultural nuances that shape management-labour relations and contribute to tensions in the Chinese-run cross-cultural work environment. While I do appreciate and refer to certain ideas in the two contrasting approaches as discussed above, the problem is that the analyses have largely failed to sufficiently account for the cultural dimensions in organisational dynamics. In the era of economic globalisation where multicultural workplaces are becoming increasingly common, and entities venturing abroad are no longer limited to Western enterprises, it has become increasingly important to contextualise management-labour relations and recognise the cultural

[53] Richard E Walton and Robert B McKersie, *A Behavioral Theory of Labor Negotiations* (ILR Press 1991).
[54] Thomas A Kochan, Harry C Katz and Robert B McKersie, *The Transformation of American Industrial Relations* (Cornell University Press 2000).

variability and interchange of values, perceptions, and habits in multicultural settings. As Hyman observes, industrial relations theory pays limited attention to the national differences in ideas, beliefs, social norms, and language, which are now regarded as of considerable importance in the world of work.[55] Taking a new perspective to see how cultural elements contribute to workplace relations enables us to appreciate how relationships, roles, and group dynamics of the social context are 'structured through cultural practices and meanings.' [56] With an understanding that organisations comprise both formal and informal relations, and that interests of members are not solely or consistently constituted by bureaucratic systems and goals, scholarly works with a culture orientation are able to move beyond disputes at the organisational level to analyse the impact of culture on forming industrial relations, including how cultural visions contribute to the dynamics of labour conflict.

1.2 Using the Idea of 'Culture'

When we use 'culture' as a construct to expose organisational dynamics, it is common to use an approach which I call 'cultural orientations' to analyse and compare the perceived 'cultural differences.' Originating from cross-cultural psychology and used widely in organisational behaviour, communication studies, and applied psychology

[55] He also highlights the importance of understanding how employers, workers, union representatives all operate on the basis of a repertoire of perceptions and assumptions, like 'vocabularies of motive,' that help shape their actions. See Richard Hyman, 'Is Industrial Relations Theory Always Ethnocentric?' in Bruce E Kaufman (ed), *Theoretical Perspectives on Work and the Employment Relationship* (Cornell University Press 2004).

[56] Michele J Gelfand and Deborah A Cai, 'Cultural Structuring Ofthe Social Context of Negotiation' in Michele J Gelfand and Jeanne M Brett (eds), *The Handbook of Negotiation and Culture* (Stanford University Press 2004).

scholarship, this 'cultural orientations' approach conceptualises culture through dimensionalisation. Studies adopting this approach are marked by some or all of these characteristics — putting cultural values and human behaviour as variables, adopting quantitative and comparative methods to measure culture, and applying or proposing integrative theoretical framework for analysing the causal link between cultural differences and the observed organisational dynamics.

For example, after conducting rounds of large-scale surveys in nearly one hundred countries, analysing survey-based data and quantifying differences between 'national cultures' by positions on the value dimensions, Hofstede and other researchers with similar aspirations identified six 'cultural dimensions,' which are power distance index, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, uncertainty avoidance index, long term vs. short-term orientation, and indulgent vs. restraint. This dimensional paradigm has been applied extensively to study the correlation between cultural orientations and other types of value dimensions, as well conceptually related external data such as economic development and national wealth.[57] Such cultural dimensions seem to enable studies to transcend 'culture' as a fuzzy notion to provide a 'mapping of the nations of the world'[58].

[57] Geert Hofstede, 'Dimensionalizing Cultures: The Hofstede Model in Context' (2011) 2 Online Readings in Psychology and Culture 1; Geert Hofstede and Michael Minkov, 'Long- versus Short-Term Orientation: New Perspectives' (2010) 16 Asia Pacific Business Review 493; Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede and Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations : Software of the Mind : Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival* (3rd edn, McGraw-Hill 2010).

[58] Peter B Smith and Shalom H Schwartz, 'Values' in John W Berry, Marshall H Segall, Çiğdem Kağıtçıbaşı (eds) *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology Volume III: Social Behavior and Applications* (2nd ed, Boston University Press 1997).

Scholarship inspired by this 'cultural orientations' approach, however, rests upon several assumptions that, with examination, can be problematic. The first assumption is that national culture is largely homogeneous and static. Many researchers, after observing the differences in behaviour exhibited by different cultural groups, account for them simply by examining the differentiating constants within their respective 'national cultures.' However, they neglect the cultural heterogeneity across local communities and within demographic groups,[59] and that local cultural patterns are constantly altered and permeated by external influences. The second assumption is that national culture can be measured through an extensive use of surveys fragmenting 'culture' into traits and dimensions, treating them as dependent, independent, or controlling variables.[60] Yet, the problem with quantifying culture lies with the difficulty in distinguishing it amongst other factors, since national, organisational, and occupational phenomena are intertwined and interdependent.[61] As Knutson, Hwang, and Deng have suggested in their work, it is important to acknowledge situational variables in contributing to differences in behaviour.[62] The third assumption rests upon simplistic conceptualisation of culture drawn from Western perspectives. Cultural dimensions are typically conceptualised as bipolar

[59] See Lisa Calvano, 'Multinational Corporations and Local Communities: A Critical Analysis of Conflict' (2008) 82 Journal of Business Ethics 793. Calvano argues that businesses need to recognise diversity within parameters of a geographically delineated community, since various groups may have competing interests, and individuals may embrace diverse identities.

[60] See Manuel Portugal Ferreira, Dan Li and Stephen Guisinger, 'Is the International Business Environment the Actual Context for International Business Research?' (2009) 49 Revista de Administração de Empresas 282. They noticed that management scholarship understands and defines 'culture' as a set of variables that can be used to distinguish one group of people from another.

[61] Dermot Williamson, 'Forward from a Critique of Hofstede's Model of National Culture' (2002) 55 Human Relations 1373; Brendan Mcsweeney, 'Hofstede's Model of National Cultural Differences and Their Consequences: A Triumph of Faith-a Failure of Analysis' (2002) 55 Human Relations 89.

[62] Thomas J Knutson, John C Hwang and Bill C Deng, 'Perception and Management of Conflict: A Comparison of Taiwanese and US Business Employees' (2000) IX Intercultural Communication Studies 1.

spectrum and measured with reference to defining attributes.[63] However, Western-centric perspectives inevitably contain cultural biases towards non-Western cultures,[64] and human behaviour is probably too subtle and nuanced to be given all-encompassing labels like 'collectivism'.

Research with a culture orientation is also common in anthropology, sociology, and socio-legal studies scholarship, but the difference is that for works grounded in the methodology of these traditions, scholars typically are more attentive to the actual interaction phenomena and informal behaviour in organisational dynamics. Drawing on ethnographic data from three American factories and a department store, Dalton recognises that legalistic rules are weak when confronting organisational realities and human feelings, because social interactions of organisational function often involve informal, non-rational, and clique-oriented behaviour.[65] By emphasising the social nature of regulations, Lange argues that organisations are one arena in which emotions and state law can interact to produce 'regulatory law in action,' and that culture comprises emotions and sets the social, cognitive, and behavioural boundaries according to what is appropriate to feel.[66]

[63] See for example, Ronald Fischer and others, 'Individualism-Collectivism as Descriptive Norms Development of a Subjective Norm Approach to Culture Measurement' (2009) 40 Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology 187.
[64] Giorgio Touburg, 'National Habitus: An Antidote to the Resilience of Hofstede's "National Culture"?' (2016) 29 Journal of Organizational Change Management 81.
[65] Melville Dalton, *Men Who Manage: Fusions of Feeling and Theory in Administration* (Routledge 2013).
[66] Bettina Lange, 'The Emotional Dimension in Legal Regulation' (2002) 29 Journal of Law and Society 197.

Framing conflicts as social construct reflecting the meaning-making process and consisting of perceptions and understandings of participants, scholarly works highlighting the importance of culture can embrace a broadened perspective cognisant of the importance of particular social context. Felstiner and his colleagues were probably among the first to emphasise the contextual dimensions of disputing and how the emergence and transformation of grievances are influenced by aspects of culture and features of social structure.[67] Later works continued to show interest in the informal aspects of conflicts. For example, Morrill revealed that in accounting firms, private grievances with low visibility were managed in an informal manner and were related to the ordering processes of social relationships.[68] In their ethnographic field studies observing cross-cultural interactions, Lauring and Jonasson argue that people facing misunderstandings and communication problems may essentialise cultural differences and ignore the potential for changing communication patterns in local organisational context, which leads to exclusion of voices and stratification of social groups.[69]

In the context of factories, specifically, Ong observed the lives of Malay female workers in Japanese-invested factories and argued that the production organisation

[67] William LF Felstiner, Richard L Abel and Austin Sarat, 'The Emergence and Transformation of Disputes: Naming, Blaming, Claiming ..' (1980) 15 Law and Society Review 631. See also Dan Coates and Steven Penrod, 'Social Psychology and the Emergence of Disputes' (1980) 15 Law and Society Review 655.

[68] Calvin Morrill, 'The Private Ordering of Professional Relations' in Deborah Kolb and Jean M Bartunek (eds), *Hidden Conflict In Organizations: Uncovering Behind-the-Scenes Disputes* (Sage Publications 1992).

[69] Charlotte Jonasson and Jakob Lauring, 'Cultural Differences in Use: The Power to Essentialize Communication Styles' (2012) 16 Journal of Communication Management 405; Jakob Lauring and Charlotte Jonasson, 'Language Use and Communication in an International Management Setting: The Power to Misrecognize' (2017) 44 Hermes-Journal of Language and Communication Studies 199.

of transnational institutions is embedded in and locally mediated by cultural discourse and inequality practices, and conflicts may arise from workers' interaction with modes of discipline in production systems and other areas of life.[70] Turning to factories in China, Siu noticed that the Chinese management uses affective personal ties involving face-giving tactics and exchange of favours as measure of soft control, resulting in management-labour tensions being displaced by personal relations.[71] Ching Kwan Lee revealed that Chinese management establishes control through discourses of familialism and policies facilitating women's fulfilment of familial responsibilities, [72] and Pun Ngai noticed how management manufactures a social identity for workers to manipulate them and extend forms of domination.[73] Through demonstrating the lived experience of workers in their particular social role, context, and background, these studies illustrate the connection between management-labour relations and socio-cultural factors.

Therefore, I argue that although 'culture' can be studied as an element of influence on behaviour, many limitations exist in the ways this concept is theorised and applied as 'cultural orientations.' My research is situated within the tradition that emphasises contextual issues, and I turn away from quantifying culture in a rigid and oversimplified manner, since it is important when understanding organisational

[70] Aihwa Ong and Carla Freeman, *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia* (2nd edn, State University of New York Press 2010).
[71] Kaxton Siu, 'Labor and Domination: Worker Control in a Chinese Factory' (2017) 45 Politics and Society 533.
[72] Ching Kwan Lee, 'Engendering the Worlds of Labor: Women Workers, Labor Markets, and Production Politics in the South China Economic Miracle' (1995) 60 American Sociological Review 378; Ching Kwan Lee, *Gender and the South China Miracle* (University of California Press 1998).
[73] Pun Ngai, 'Becoming Dagongmei (Working Girls): The Politics of Identity and Difference in Reform China' (1999) 42 The China Journal 1.

dynamics to consider the local context and adopt a more nuanced and dynamic conception of culture.[74] I examine the interaction effects of culture and embrace a qualitative and process-oriented account to examine the construction of meanings and practices. With a culture orientation, this research can expand our focus to the environments and contexts, privileging interpersonal communication and individual experience in the organisational setting. Globalisation as an inevitable trend means that organisations, especially transnational enterprises, need to be understood as sites of increasing global interconnectedness embedded in heterogeneous societal contexts and local peculiarities.[75] The culture orientation of my research can help me to answer my research questions by locating management-labour relations and other legally-oriented or near law phenomena within socio-cultural contexts.

As a starting point, this research is informed by the understanding of culture proposed by Swidler and Merry, that culture can be imagined as a toolkit, a repertoire of actions, practices, and beliefs, of which people draw upon in different configurations to construct strategies of action and solve problems.[76] Day by day, people make decisions that make sense to them in their own social context. They tend to exhibit specific attitudes and patterns in thinking and acting, as if selecting whichever in their perception best fits the circumstances they are facing from a set of socially defined

[74] Jakob Lauring, 'Intercultural Organizational Communication: The Social Organizing of Interaction in International Encounters' (2011) 48 Journal of Business Communication 231; Francesca Bargiela-Chiappini and Catherine Nickerson, 'Intercultural Business Communication: A Rich Field of Studies' (2003) 24 Journal of Intercultural Studies 3.
[75] Cornelius Schubert and Tobias Röhl, 'Ethnography and Organisations: Materiality and Change as Methodological Challenges' (2019) 19 Qualitative Research 164.
[76] See Swidler (n 20); Sally Engle Merry, 'What Is Legal Culture ? An Anthropological Perspective' (2010) 5 Journal of Comparative Law 40.

options. Culture, therefore, is not assumed to be a range of static ideas imposed upon people, driving them continuously towards a fixed direction to manifest certain traits and think, behave, and interact in specific ways. Although comparison here is drawn with a 'toolkit,' it is important to keep in mind that culture is not a closed box but porous — developing over time through the benefits of learning and cross-cultural interactions. The options that people choose are far from dispositional, since they change over time, repeatedly adjusting to internal social changes and changing external influences.

This interpretation of culture is helpful, since there is an emphasis on the context specific nature of values, perceptions, and behaviour, and it helps me answer my research questions with a 'bottom-up,' rather than 'top-down' perspective. With this approach, my study moves to a more interactionist means to appreciate how cultural differences influence actual practices in the cross-cultural workplace. The focus is on the study of actual interaction phenomena from viewpoints where different visions and expectations meet each other, in contrast to the universalist and cross-cultural perspective of the 'national culture' approach where different frequently held assumptions about culture are used to analyse and compare behaviour. To address the limitations of simplistic cultural and behavioural conceptualisations, my study aims at discerning the subtle, situation-dependent, and multifaceted aspects of human behaviour within multicultural workplace dynamics.

This research is also informed by the notion of 'legal culture' to explore context-shaped differences in how people comprehend appropriate rules, style of governance, and means of regulation. Nelken suggests that legal culture can be used in a holistic approach to explain attitudes and behaviour of a given unit and compare across other units.[77] This approach shares similarities with the way culture is conceptualised in cross-cultural management scholarship, and similarly, is met with some criticisms. For example, Cotterrell argues it is problematic to assume culture to be a unity instead of an aggregation, and culture should be viewed as a 'fragmented diversity of influences, experiences, understandings, environments, expectations, and constraints.'[78] Holistic view of legal culture as facts with different facets requires clarification of definition of the facts and justification of the unity, which risks confusing 'the part with the whole' and falling into tautology and theoretical incoherence if the concept is simultaneously used as an explanatory factor and as the outcome of the social processes to be explained.[79]

In view of the problems in defining and conceptualising legal culture, this research acknowledges that legal culture can be used in another way. In her empirical studies comparing the perceptions of law and identities of courts in England, Poland, and Bulgaria, Kurkchiyan uses legal culture to identify the patterns of constructing meaning of law and behaviour towards it throughout society, and this permits an

[77] David Nelken, 'Towards a Sociology of Legal Adaptation' in David Nelken and Johannes Feest (eds), *Adapting Legal Cultures* (Hart 2001); David Nelken, 'Using the Concept of Legal Culture' (2004) 29 Australian Journal of Legal Philosophy 1.
[78] Roger Cotterrell, 'Law in Culture' (2004) 17 Ratio Juris 1.
[79] See the discussion in Franz Von Benda-Beckmann and Keebet Von Benda-Beckmann, 'Why Not Legal Culture' (2010) 5 Journal of Comparative Law 104; David Nelken, 'Comparative Legal Research and Legal Culture: Facts, Approaches, and Values' (2016) 12 Annual Review of Law and Social Science 45.

assessment of how legal ideas and expectations are related to other social constructs of the local context.[80] With reference to this understanding of legal culture, rather than using legal culture as an object of enquiry itself or some concept to be defined, in this research I use it as an approach to scrutinise the dynamics of the Chinese-managed cross-cultural workplace, prompting me to study the interaction of meanings according to particular contexts, and to spot differences in the nuances of near-law phenomena and describe how they play out in the everyday workplace between different socio-cultural groups. Representing a departure from strict explanatory framework to a more interpretative framework, legal culture as an approach helps me to identify, explore, and analyse how people of different backgrounds interact and adapt to each other, thus enabling the assessment of cultural differences and conflicts to be embedded in a cross-cultural context to take novel perspectives of socio-legal scholarship.

To sum up, in this research I use culture as the methodological lens to locate and interpret phenomena as they are experienced and perceived, by subjecting patterns to empirical inquiry to investigate how they are embedded within the specificity of social context. Refraining from defining culture as some immutable collective programming of the mind within national borders, this approach allows for an understanding of work phenomena that reaches beyond the analysis of cultural orientations and dispute resolution to account for the subtler meanings, perceptions, and expectations

[80] Marina Kurkchiyan, 'Comparing Legal Cultures: Three Models of Court for Small Civil Cases' (2010) 5 Journal of Comparative Law 169; Marc Hertogh and Marina Kurkchiyan, '"When Politics Comes into Play, Law Is No Longer Law": Images of Collective Legal Consciousness in the UK, Poland and Bulgaria' (2016) 12 International Journal of Law in Context 404.

that people attach to their experience. This approach also reminds me to focus on the interplay of different perspectives and link it to the broader concepts of social order, moral consensus, and economic forces.

2. Placing Inferences in the Contemporary Scholarship

Through data analysis with culture as the lens, my research recognises that the observations and meanings representing the values, expectations, and visions of organisational members can be put under certain concepts in different strands of scholarship. Yet, this research is not guided by pre-existing conceptual framework. The concepts to be discussed are not predetermined variables, but that upon my data analysis, they have emerged from conceptual sense-making as relevant. These concepts served as the analytical tool to stimulate my thinking and enhance my sensitivity to nuances, as I compared and contrasted interpretations with occurrences in my data to elaborate pre-existing knowledge and extant theories. This is consistent with my ethnographic approach, which subscribes to an interpretative view that the research process is created through interactional construction and rendering of data.[81] While I attempt to understand the dynamics of social practices observed in the field, relying on knowledge from localised patterns of interaction, I combine this with a

[81] Kathy Charmaz, 'Grounded Theory' in JA Smith, R Harre and L Van Langenhove (eds), *Rethinking Methods in Psychology* (Sage Publications 1996).

reconstructive effort to analyse viewpoints and meanings beyond the current situation of activity.[82]

2.1 Leadership, Conflict, Communication, and Regulatory Enforcement Behaviour

Upon analysing the data, I found that people in the multicultural workplace each have their own expectations and ideas about how the place should be managed, how management-labour relations should be maintained, and how grievances should be handled. These observations come close to the leadership, conflict management, and communication behaviour discussed in organisational behaviour and management scholarship, as well as regulatory enforcement discussed in socio-legal and public administration scholarship.

To study organisational dynamics, scholars have created various categories and styles of behaviour for analysis. Lewin, Lippitt, and White in their seminal works distinguished between autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire styles of leadership which are characterised by different control over decision-making, distribution of responsibilities, and empowerment of subordinates.[83] Fiedler classified leadership style as relationship- or task-motivated.[84] Similarly, Blake and Mouton constructed the 'managerial grid' to dimensionalise managerial behaviour based on the concern

[82] Reference is made to Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S Lincoln (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (5th edn, Sage Publications 2018).
[83] Kurt Lewin, Ronald Lippitt and Ralph K. White, 'Patterns of Aggressive Behavior in Experimentally Created "Social Climates"' (1939) 10 Journal of Social Psychology 271; see also J Kevin Barge, *Leadership : Communication Skills for Organizations & Groups* (St Martin's Press 1994).
[84] Fred E Fiedler, *A Theory of Leadership Effectiveness* (McGraw-Hill 1967).

for people or production, having identified five basic management styles from the grid, namely indifferent, status quo, dictatorial, accommodating, and sound.[85] As external culture influences the dynamics of internal organisational culture, problems may arise when the leadership approach of managers conflicts with individual values of employees.[86] It is suggested that autocratic management approach emphasising strong hierarchical orientation and bureaucratic structure may create frustration for people used to more participatory working environment.[87] Contrarily, studies have found that consultative management is perceived by African employees as incapable of shouldering responsibilities and maintaining authority,[88] and such management style is found to have counterproductive effect on Russian workers' performance due to their strong communal values and fear of retribution.[89] Since these studies typically rely on quantitative methods based on cultural assumptions and are not nuanced enough in describing phenomena, my study as a form of organisational ethnography can move away from simplistic labelling and better capture the dynamics underlying the cross-cultural experiences of organisational members.

[85] Blake and Mouton (n 23).
[86] See David McGuire and others, 'The Impact of Individual Values on Human Resource Decision-Making by Line Managers' (2006) 27 International Journal of Manpower 251. They also call for managers to be more aware of the fact that their own values influence how they make decisions.
[87] See for example, Ursula Mense-Petermann, 'Micro-Political or Inter-Cultural Conflicts? - An Integrating Approach' (2006) 12 Journal of International Management 302; Theo Nichols and Nadir Sugur, 'Globalised Management and Local Labour : The Case of the White-Goods Industry in Turkey' (2002) 33 Industrial Relations Journal 68; Wang and others (n 5).
[88] Hideo Ishida, 'Transferability of Japanese Human Resource Management Abroad' (1986) 25 Human Resource Management 103; Gido Mapunda, 'African Philosophy of Management in the Context of African Traditional Cultures and Organisational Culture' (2013) 12 Philosophy of Management 9.
[89] Dianne HB Welsh, Fred Luthans and Steven M Sommer, 'Managing Russian Factory Workers: The Impact of U.S.-Based Behavioral and Participative Techniques' (1993) 36 Academy of Management Journal 58.

Conflict behaviour, similar to leadership behaviour, is also studied and theorised as various styles. A well-known taxonomy is proposed by Thomas and Kilman, illustrating five conflict management approaches: avoiding, accommodating, compromising, competing, and collaborating, as classified by dimensions of assertiveness and cooperativeness.[90] 'Cultural orientation' is found to influence the preference of conflict management style and nature of conflict resolution. For example, the preference for cumbersome resolution process emphasising all-aspects recognition rather than best goals is said to be attributable to the cultural dispositions of high uncertainty avoidance and femininity.[91] Researchers have tried to explain the prevalence of conflict avoidance among East Asians based on alleged East Asian cultural ethics,[92] and with extensive use of surveys, they have identified that Chinese tend to be conflict avoiding, and Americans tend to rely on competitive procedures.[93] In a multicultural work environment, differences in conflict management approaches may generate intergroup frictions and adversely impact workplace harmony. Chinese employees in an American company required to adopt confrontational conflict resolution norms appreciated the 'positive sides' like encouraging participation in decision-making, but they disagreed with norms perceived as mean and 'not giving

[90] Thomas (n 23); Blake and Mouton (n 23); Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann (n 23).
[91] JS Tsai and CSF Chi, 'Influences of Chinese Cultural Orientations and Conflict Management Styles on Construction Dispute Resolving Strategies' (2009) 135(10) Journal of Construction Engineering and Management 995.
[92] See for example, Kamil M Kozan, 'Culture and Conflict Management: A Theoretical Framework' (2008) 8 International Journal of Conflict Management 338; Kwang-Kuo Hwang, 'Guanxi and Mientze: Conflict Resolution in Chinese Society' (1997) 7 Intercultural Communication Studies VII 17.
[93] MW Morris and others, 'Conflict Management Style: Accounting for Cross-National Differences' (1998) 29 Journal of International Business Studies 729; Shiyong Peng, Zhou He and Jian-hua Zhu, 'Conflict Management Styles among Employees of Sino-American, Sino-French, and State-Owned Enterprises in China' (2000) IX Intercultural Communication Studies 33.

face.'[94] Lu's survey study of Japanese managers in Taiwan, similarly, suggests that applying direct and legalistic conflict management practices to employees from more 'collectivistic' cultures may lower their performance and satisfaction.[95] These studies, however, do not place much emphasis on the ways people make sense of and give meaning to the conflict management mechanisms. My study thus differs by its detailing of how organisational members selectively use institutional or informal methods to address actual and potential grievances, and relatedly, how they perceive management authority and organisational structure.

With critical reflection on my data, harmony have emerged to be a relevant idea in my research, particularly in relation to leadership and conflict management. Scholars using the idea of harmony are generally drawn to examine its influence as a cultural orientation on conflict behaviour, recognising that harmony is subject to significant cultural differences. Comparisons are typically made between Eastern and Western cultures. Conceptualising harmony as 'the balance achieved in relationships' and using surveys to measure harmony, researchers have suggested that Hong Kong employees compared with their Australian counterparts had stronger 'disintegration avoidance' motives, which was related to their compromising and obliging behaviour.[96] Comparing ancient Chinese and Greek philosophy, Li argues that

[94] Yiheng Deng and Kaibin Xu, 'Chinese Employees Negotiating Differing Conflict Management Expectations in a U.S.- Based Multinational Corporation Subsidiary in Southwest China' (2014) 28 Management Communication Quarterly 609.
[95] Lung-Tan Lu, 'Maintaining Satisfactory Performance of Expatriates: The Effects of Culture and Conflict Management Style' (2011) 5 African Journal of Business Management 6608.
[96] Kwok Leung and others, 'Harmony and Conflict: A Cross-Cultural Investigation in China and Australia' (2011) 42 Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology 795. See also Chao C Chen and others, 'Group Harmony in the Workplace: Conception, Measurement, and Validation' (2016) 33 Asia Pacific Journal of Management 903; Kwok Leung and others, 'Harmony and Conflict: A Cross-Cultural Investigation

ancient Greek notion of harmony is based on a linear progressive model with a pre-set order, but ancient China understood harmony as a comprehensive process of harmonisation.[97] In a study comparing harmony as a strategy of social order, Holliday argues that the Chinese concept of harmony, rooted in Confucianism, necessitates considerable social control, conformity, and strong sense of duty, while the Burmese notion of harmony, rooted in Buddhism, turns more to regular people and less to the leader that it rarely seeks levels of ritually generated social unity.[98] Though, these studies show that much of the discussion of harmony either follows a narrow understanding of the concept as in organisational culture context, or remains too philosophical and descriptive in the broader socio-cultural context. Offering a different focus, my research analyses organisational members' cultural normative understandings and expectations about harmony. It provides a view of how people refer to these ideas when behaving towards each other at the workplace.

Many studies of intercultural organisational communication like to perceive communication behaviour in the frame of national cultural differences.[99] Hall's seminal work theorises way of communication along cultural dimensions of 'high-

in China and Australia' (2011) 42 Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology 795; Sara FY Tang and Paul S Kirkbride, 'Developing Conflict Management Skills in Hong Kong: An Analysis of Some Cross-Cultural Implications' (1986) 17 Management Education and Development 287; Virginia SY Kwan, Michael Harris Bond and Theodore M Singelis, 'Pancultural Explanations for Life Satisfaction: Adding Relationship Harmony to Self-Esteem' (1997) 73 Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 1038.

[97] Chenyang Li, 'The Ideal of Harmony in Ancient Chinese and Greek Philosophy' (2008) 7 Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy 81.

[98] Ian Holliday, 'National Unity Struggles in Myanmar: A Degenerate Case of Governance for Harmony in Asia' (2007) 47 Asian Survey 374.

[99] See for example, Denice Welch, Lawrence Welch and Rebecca Piekkari, 'Speaking in Tongues The Importance of Language in International' (2005) 35 International Studies of Management and Organizations 10; Kathleen J Dunkerley and W Peter Robinson, 'Similarities and Differences in Perceptions and Evaluations of the Communication Styles of American and British Mangers' (2002) 21 Journal of Language and Social Psychology 393.

context' and 'low-context,' that people in 'high-context' cultures keep their feelings under self-control and communicate through simple messages with deep meaning, while people in 'low-context' cultures communicate in a more explicit and nonpersonal manner.[100] Based on conceptions of communication styles, studies generally seek to understand what are the differences in culturally-influenced communication styles and how do they present obstacles to organisational communication. The study of Nordic expatriates and Japanese local employees by Peltokorpi found that divergent communication styles, the cultural value of collectivism, and the lack of a shared language negatively impacted intercultural communication.[101] Using an inventory scale to measure communication style, Sanchez-Burks and the team argue that there are significant differences in communication behaviours between East Asians and Americans, where Americans pay considerably less attention to indirect cues.[102] Although these studies acknowledge that communication is dynamic and sensitive to situational and contextual cues, they do not sufficiently consider the local context of the workplace or the social network, variables that are considered highly important in my study to include in the understanding of cross-cultural dynamics at work.

The different ideas about rules, as revealed in my data, appear relevant to the concept of regulatory culture in socio-legal and public administration scholarship. Regulatory

[100] Hall (n 24); Kim, Pan and Park (n 24).
[101] Vesa Peltokorpi, 'Intercultural Communication Patterns and Tactics: Nordic Expatriates in Japan' (2007) 16 International Business Review 68.
[102] Jeffrey Sanchez-Burks and others, 'Conversing Across Cultures: East-West Communication Styles in Work and Nonwork Contexts' (2003) 85 Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 363.

culture is derived from cultural, social, and legal sources,[103] and manifestation typically takes the form of regulatory enforcement style, which describes how regulators ensures compliance of the regulated. There are binary distinctions such as adversarial and cooperative enforcement styles,[104] and there are conceptualisations based on dimensions of formalism and coercion.[105] Scholars observed cross-national differences in regulatory style, suggesting Americans are legalistic and adversarial while British and Japanese are informal and flexible,[106] and like leadership, conflict management and communication, regulatory enforcement behaviour can sow the seeds for frictions, for example Aoki and Cioffi's discussion of the confrontation between metal products producers and regulators suggest that formal coercive regulatory styles provide transparency and foster compliance, but regulators are prone to tensions arising from resentment and distrust of regulated parties.[107] Although these studies typically suggest that national culture constrains regulatory enforcement style, such differences may exist more on the national level legal framework, given local levels of enforcement can be inversely related to national levels of regulation, and that the concepts of rules, social practices, and customary

[103] Errol Meidinger, 'Regulatory Culture: A Theoretical Outline' (1987) 9 Law and Policy 355.
[104] Steven Kelman, *Regulating America, Regulating Sweden: A Comparative Study of Occupational Health and Safety* (The MIT Press, 1981); Eugene Bardach and Robert A Kagan, *Going by the Book: The Problem of Regulatory Unreasonableness* (Transaction Publishers, 2002)
[105] May and Winter (n 26).
[106] See, for example: David Vogel, *National Styles of Regulation: Environmental Policy in Great Britain and the United States* (Cornell University Press 1986); Frank K Upham, 'Privatized Regulation: Japanese Regulatory Style in Comparative and International Perspective' (1996) 20 Fordham International Law Journal 396; Robert A Kagan, 'Introduction: Comparing National Styles of Regulation in Japan and the United States' (2000) 22 Law and Policy 226; Yuka Sakurai, 'Comparing Cross-Cultural Regulatory Styles and Processes in Dealing with Transfer Pricing' (2002) 30 International Journal of the Sociology of Law 173.
[107] Kazumasu Aoki and John Cioffi, 'Poles Apart: Industrial Waste Management Regulation and Enforcement in the United States and Japan' (1999) 21 Law and Policy 213.

norms are not self-contained categories but are rather closely linked.[108] On an individual level, the style of rule enforcement may also be influenced by personal values, past experiences, and nature of the regulated industry or enterprise. In this research, I take these factors into account to discuss how rule related behaviour in the garment factory is shaped by internal and external factors.

2.2 Model of Social Ordering

My findings suggest that in the multicultural work environment, organisational members attempt to fit to the organisational culture and maintain clear lines of authority and accountability. Yet, as reflected in their patterns of behaviour and communication, I observed that the members had different ideas about how social order should be organised through role performances, and how hierarchy should operate at the work level. Although an organisation creates its own hierarchy, it inevitably bears the imprint of the type of relationships that characterise the broader society of the home country, and it may be different from the local employees' expectations about social ordering.

As a mechanism of governance, hierarchical arrangement in organisations provides order, improves coordination, and reduces uncertainty through differentiating roles

[108] Bettina Lange, 'National Environmental Regulation? A Case-Study of Waste Management in England and Germany' (1999) 11 Journal of Environmental Law 58; Bettina Lange, 'Compliane Construction in the Context of Environmental Regulation' (1999) 8 Social and Legal Studies 549.

and delineating lines of accountability.[109] It also serves motivational function, as people at the lower position of the hierarchy are said to be incentivised to attain higher positions and enjoy better entitlements.[110] Researchers have suggested that hierarchy is usually structured in terms of status and power, of which the former, being the extent to which one is respected or admired, emerges from expectations based on past performance and socio-demographic attributes, and the latter, being the asymmetric control over valued resources in social relations, expresses itself in the discretion to distribute or withhold rewards and punishments.[111]

Some researchers argue that hierarchy as a form of social relations can be either formal, as delineated by job titles, reporting structures, and rules consensually agreed upon, or can be informal, as subjectively understood by individuals that form inferences and make judgment about other people.[112] However, my study shows that the real situation is much more nuanced, as there can be a spectrum of both formal and informal hierarchies. Real-world hierarchies could be organised along different variables and still be formal, since different forms of hierarchies relate to and interact

[109] See the discussion in Robert E Lane, 'The Fear of Equality' (1959) 53 The American Political Science Review 35; Michael a Hogg, 'Personality and Social Psychology Review' (2001) 5 Personality and Social Psychology Review 184; Nicole Woolsey Biggart and Gary G Hamilton, 'The Power of Obedience' (1984) 29 Administrative Science Quarterly 540.

[110] Arnold Sherwood Tannenbaum and others, 'Hierarchy in Organizations' (1977) 1 Nursing Administration Quarterly 87.

[111] Cecilia L Ridgeway and Henry A Walker., 'Status Structures' in Gary Alan Fine, Karen S Cook and James S House (eds), *Sociological Perspectives on Social Psychology* (Allyn and Bacon 1995); Joe C Magee and Adam D Galinsky, 'Social Hierarchy: The Self-reinforcing Nature of Power and Status' (2008) 2 Academy of Management Annals 351; Joseph Berger, Bernard P Cohen and Morris Zeldich Jr., 'Status Characteristics and Social Interaction' (1972) 37 American Sociological Review 241; Richard M Emerson, 'Power-Dependence Relations' (1962) 27 Sociological Review 31.

[112] Joe C Magee and Adam D Galinsky, 'Social Hierarchy: The Self-reinforcing Nature of Power and Status'(2008) 2 Academy of Management Annals 351; Thomas Diefenbach and John AA Sillince,'Formal and Informal Hierarchy in Different Types of Organization' (2011) 32 Organization Studies 1515.

with each other, for example people can be in social relationships not only via official rule systems but also via unofficial mechanisms.[113] In my study, I discuss how people may have different role identities, and these identities can play out across different situations. This suggests that individuals are always acting in the context of complex social structure out of which multiple self-perceptions may emerge.

Different meaning systems can shape the conception of hierarchy and its manifestations.[114] Researchers have found that different socio-cultural contexts come with different normative ideas about how social status is understood, conferred, and expressed.[115] For example, it is suggested that Americans are more influenced by subjective status and Japanese more so by objective status.[116] Researchers tend to believe one of the characteristics of Asian cultures is the normative acceptance of hierarchical inequalities, and that includes conformity to different status and role expectations, given that status is tied strongly to one's prescribed place and role within a hierarchy.[117] Particular meaning systems shaped by social practices and embedded in social contexts can promote particular views of the self and others,[118] as demonstrated in studies unveiling the positive associations between system of

[113] Diefenbach and Sillince (n 112).
[114] Carmi Schooler, 'Culture and Social Structure: The Relevance of Social Structure to Cultural Psychology' in Dov Cohen and Shinobu Kitayama (eds), *Handbook of Cultural Psychology* (The Guilford Press 2007).
[115] Jiyoung Park and others, 'Social Status and Anger Expression: The Cultural Moderation Hypothesis' (2013) 13 Emotion 1122.
[116] Katherine B Curhan and others, 'Subjective and Objective Hierarchies and Their Relations to Psychological Well-Being: A US/Japan Comparison' (2014) 5 Social Psychological and Personality Science 855; Jiyoung Park and others (n 115).
[117] Triandis and Gelfand (n 28); Kuwabara and others (n 28).
[118] Alan Page Fiske and others, 'The Cultural Matrix of Social Psychology.' in Daniel Todd Gilbert, Susan T Fiske and Gardner Lindzey (eds), *The Handbook of Social Psychology* (McGraw-Hill 1998); Hazel Rose Markus and Shinobu Kitayama, 'Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation' (1991) 98 Psychological Review 224.

hierarchy, self- and other- orientation, and historical tradition.[119] My research suggests that frictions at the multicultural workplace can be triggered by the mismatch between culturally-informed perceptions towards the form, function, and base of hierarchy. Whereas researchers typically make comparison between Eastern and Western cultures, my study explores two Eastern models of hierarchy and unveils the different means of which power and identity are constructed within structured hierarchical relations.

While I recognise the value of a holistic conception of culture as meaning system embedded in historical tradition, in this research, my analysis of hierarchy takes a relational approach, which aligns with this study's focus on interactions, social ties, and networks. Based on the assumption that social phenomena should be understood as interdependent action established and modified by relationships,[120] this study identifies individual's strategies for constructing and sustaining relations and positions. Culture flows through the social ties and influences such strategies; therefore, social ties are themselves cultural and inherently an intersubjective phenomenon existing between the actors.[121] Even if participants have their own socio-cultural characteristics, their identities and actions are constantly emerging and

[119] See Yuri Miyamoto and others, 'Culture and Social Hierarchy: Self- and Other-Oriented Correlates of Socioeconomic Status across Cultures Yuri' (2018) 115 Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 427.
[120] Reference is made to Raija Raittila and Mari Vuorisalo, 'Relational Analysis and the Ethnographic Approach: Constructing Preschool Childhood' (2021) 16 Ethnography and Education 358.
[121] Nick Crossley, 'Relational Sociology and Culture: A Preliminary Framework' (2015) 25 International Review of Sociology 65; Ann Mische, 'Relational Sociology, Culture, and Agency' in John Scott and Peter Carrington (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Social Network Analysis* (Sage Publications 2011).

evolving through interactions.[122] Tightly interfaced with the contextual and relational environment, this approach allows me to view different actors as interacting partners in the generation of adaptive social responses.

2.3 Perception of Fairness and Justice

My observation at the cross-cultural work environment revealed that the members thought about justice in different manners and attached different meanings to it. Nevertheless, in studies about fairness and justice across disciplines, the concept is often taken for granted by researchers and interpreted in a rather Western-centric way. Usually, research does not emphasise the cultural grounding of justice, despite how cultural attributes may play an integral part in shaping the perception of justice.

The idea of justice, originally grounded in philosophy, is concerned with the distribution of the condition and goods which affects the well-being of individual members of a group and fosters effective cooperation to promote individual well-being.[123] As justice is introduced into the organisational setting, researchers have explored its role in individuals' perception and experience concerning resource distribution, organisational policy, and interpersonal treatment at the workplace.[124]

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[122] See the discussion in François Dépelteau, 'Relational Thinking in Sociology: Relevance, Concurrence and Dissonance' in François Dépelteau (ed), *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology* (Palgrave Macmillan 2018).

[123] Morton Deutsch, 'Equity, Equality, and Need: What Determines Which Value Will Be Used as the Basis of Distributive Justice?' (1975) 31 Journal of Social Issues 137.

[124] Andrew Li, Russell S Cropanzano and Agustin Molina, 'Fairness at the Unit Level: Justice Climate, Justice Climate Strength, and Peer Justice', *The Oxford Handbook of Justice in the Workplace* (2015); Yochi Cohen-Charash and Paul E Spector, 'The Role of Justice in Organizations: A Meta-Analysis' (2001) 86 Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes 278.

Several concepts on justice are created, and these concepts are quite expansive in their applications.

There is the concept of distributive justice, which refers to justice in the economic relationship of distribution. In organisational context, distributive justice reflects the perceived fairness of outcome that people receive.[125] Equity is said to occur when there is fairness of outcome received relative to the contribution people make,[126] and individuals who perceive themselves as under-rewarded or over-rewarded may experience distress and possible urge to restore equity.[127] Compared with distributive justice, procedural justice is concerned with social exchange relationship. It refers to the perceived fairness of the means used to determine the amount people receive, and in his seminal work, Leventhal has identified six rules of process fairness.[128] Through survey studies, researchers have demonstrated that procedural injustice at work is correlated negatively with job satisfaction and psychosomatic wellbeing, since low procedural justice creates uncertainty by reducing individual ability to affect important decision.[129] In addition to distributive and procedural justice, employees

[125] Deutsch (n 123).
[126] See, for example, Stacy J Adams, 'Inequity in Social Exchange', *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology. Vol. 2* (Academic Press 1965); Jason A Colquitt, 'On the Dimensionality of Organizational Justice: A Construct Validation of a Measure.' (2011) 86 Journal of Applied Psychology 386.
[127] Richard C Huseman, John D Hatfield and Edward W Miles, 'A New Perspective on Equity Theory: The Equity Sensitivity Construct' (1987) 12 Academy of Management Review 222.
[128] Gerald S Leventhal, 'What Should Be Done with Equity Theory? New Approaches to the Study of Fairness in Social Relationships' in Kenneth J Gergen, Martin S Greenberg and Richard H Willis (eds), *Social Exchange* (Springer 1980).
[129] See, for example, Manfred Schmitt and Martin Dörfel, 'Procedural Injustice at Work, Justice Sensitivity, Job Satisfaction and Psychosomatic Well-Being' (1999) 29 European Journal of Social Psychology 443; Jochen Reb and others, 'Different Wrongs, Different Remedies? Reactions to Organizational Remedies after Procedural and Interactional Injustice' (2006) 59 Personnel Psychology 31.

expect to be treated with respect, dignity, honesty.[130] This is known as interactional justice, the propriety of decision-makers' behaviour and the interpersonal treatment people receive.[131] Studies suggest that interactional justice is positively associated with decision effectiveness, interpersonal trust, and interorganisational attachment, and it can suppress the negative effects of cultural differences.[132]

Across different countries, effects of the abovementioned forms of justice on employee outcome such as job performance, absenteeism, and job satisfaction have been positive,[133] but researchers have identified cross-cultural differences in the ways justice exerts influence, and have demonstrated that 'cultural orientations' can moderate the relationship between justice perceptions and employee outcomes. For example, relationship between procedural justice and trust in supervisor is suggested to be stronger for those with lower power distance orientations.[134] Pillai and colleagues found that distributive justice significantly affects both trust and job satisfaction of Hong Kong participants, but for American participants, only trust is

[130] Maddy Janssens, Luc Sels and Inge Van den Brande, 'Multiple Types of Psychological Contracts: A Six-Cluster Solution' (2003) 56 Human Relations 1349; Jill Kickul and Matthew A Liao-Troth, 'The Meaning behind the Message: How Employees Motives and Perceptions of Climate Influence Their Interpretation of the Psychological Contract' (2003) 18 American Journal of Business 23.
[131] Robert J Bies and Debra L Shapiro, 'Interactional Fairness Judgments: The Influence of Causal Accounts' (1987) 1 Social Justice Research 199; Robert J Bies, 'Interactional (in) Justice: The Sacred and the Profane' in Jerald Greenberg and Russell Cropanzano (eds), *Advances in Organizational Justice* (Stanford University Press 2002).
[132] Yadong Luo, 'Toward the Micro and Macro-Level Consequences of Interactional Justice in Cross-Cultural Joint Ventures' (2006) 59 Human Relations 1019; Olugbenga J Ladebo, Joseph M Awotunde and Petra AbdulSalaam-Saghir, 'Coworkers' and Supervisor Interactional Justice: Correlates of Extension Personnel's Job Satisfaction, Distress, and Aggressive Behavior' (2008) 9 Journal of Behavioral and Applied Management 206.
[133] See Simon SK Lam, John Schaubroeck and Samuel Aryee, 'Relationship between Organizational Justice and Employee Work Outcomes: A Cross-National Study' (2003) 23 Journal of Organizational Behavior 1; Michael W Morris and Kwok Leung, 'Justice for All? Progress in Research on Cultural Variation in the Psychology of Distributive and Procedural Justice' (2000) 49 Applied Psychology 100.
[134] Lee, Pillutla and Law (n 30).

affected.[135] Tyler, Lind, and Huo found that compared with Hong Kong participants, procedural and relational factors had a stronger effect on American participants' support for authority decision and fondness of authority.[136]

While these studies may be helpful in comparing human behaviour, there are some limitations with the way they use the justice perceptions. Justice is typically measured by assessing respondents' perceptions of the treatment they receive, and the popular classifications and measures of justice are all developed in the Western context. Yet, differences exist in the extent to which a given treatment is perceived to be fair, and justice measures may not appropriately capture culturally shaped differences in defining justice perceptions.[137] Particularly in the West, as Miller argues, justice tends to be defined in terms of universal principles, whereas goodness and compassion tend to be perceived as being more discretionary and particularistic in nature.[138] Therefore in my study, I take the view that the understanding of justice and fairness must be nuanced and locally grounded. During my fieldwork, I noticed how people define and experience justice and fairness, and I conducted my analysis with consideration of relational influences like work relations and emotional attachment.

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[135] Rajnandini Pillai, Eric S Williams and J Justin Tan, 'Are the Scales Tipped in Favor of Procedural or Distributive Justice? An Investigation of the U.S., India, Germany, and Hong Kong (China)' (2001) 12 International Journal of Conflict Management 312.

[136] Tom R Tyler, E Allan Lind and Yuen J Huo, 'Cultural Values and Authority Relations: The Psychology of Conflict Resolution Across Cultures' (2000) 6 Psychology, Public Policy, and Law 1138.

[137] See for example, the approach used in Tae Yeol Kim and Kwok Leung, 'Forming and Reacting to Overall Fairness: A Cross-Cultural Comparison' (2007) 104 Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes 83. Identifying a number of cultural constructs, such as materialism, this research attempts to measure the cross-cultural differences in organisational justice issues.

[138] Joan G Miller, 'A Cultural Perspective on the Morality of Beneficence and Interpersonal Responsibility' in Stella Ting-Toomey and Felipe Korzenny (eds), *Interpersonal and Intercultural Communication Annual* (Sage Publications 1991).

Since prior research on justice in organisational context mostly aims at creating abstract, depersonalised models with a focus on individual and organisational outcomes,[139] my research in making sense of personalised and emotional phenomena, refers to the approach which contextualises justice to consider the effects of identity in deciding when justice matters.[140] Identity intersects with justice, affecting why people care about justice and the operational definition of justice, while on the other hand, the perceptions of justice and treatment can influence the identity attributed to the recipient. My research suggests that individual identity, intertwined with culturally-shaped norms and values, contributes to justice motivation and influences the way harmony is maintained in close social relationships.

2.4 Cultural Intermediaries

With lens to focus on culture-related issues, my research allows me to appreciate the presence of groups that perform as cultural intermediary and their importance in the dynamics of management-labour relations. My research of the workplace reveals that there were a number of bicultural Chinese-Burmese people hired as interpreters to provide translation and facilitate cross-cultural communication, and as well as dozens of Burmese workers promoted as supervisors to oversee production on behalf of the Chinese management. These intermediaries carried their own sets of values and were

[139] Monica Forrett and Mary Sue Love, 'Employee Justice Perceptions and Coworker Relationships' (2008) 29 Leadership and Organization Development Journal 248.
[140] Reference is made to Susan Clayton and Susan Opotow, 'Justice and Identity: Changing Perspectives on What Is Fair' (2003) 7 Personality and Social Psychology Review 298.

acculturated to the environment, and at the same time, they had to fulfil the role of cultural broker to understand the needs and circumstances of different parties and negotiate the cultural differences.

The term 'cultural broker' was first coined by historians and anthropologists to identify people who worked as mediators, negotiators, interpreters, or guides between the European colonisers and non-European subjects.[141] Scholars discussed that other than translating, cultural brokers engaged in more complex forms of intermediation, such as interpreting diplomatic and political concepts, informing outsiders about the religious or symbolic content of traditions, and facilitating commercial relationships.[142] For example, Richter shows that cultural brokers between the English of New York and the Iroquois Confederacy, as simultaneous members of two networks, combined a variety of roles and gained their identities through service in multiple contexts, allowing themselves to promote the aims of one group while protecting the interests of another.[143] Outside the context of colonialism, cultural broker is a research topic in disciplines such as education, popular culture, and healthcare,[144] and it is used to convey the idea of intermediaries who enable

[141] Kristina Gustafsson, Eva Norström and Ingrid Fioretos, 'The Interpreter: A Cultural Broker?' in Christina Schäffner, Krzysztof Kredens and Yvonne Fowler (eds), *Interpreting in a Changing Landscape: Selected Papers from Critical Link 6*, Vol 6 (John Benjamins 2013); Margaret Connell Szasz, *Between Indian and White Worlds: The Cultural Broker* (University of Oklahoma Press 2001).

[142] Eric Hinderaker, 'Translation and Cultural Brokerage' in Philip J Deloria and Neal Salisbury (eds), *A Companion to American Indian History* (Blackwell Publishing 2002); Nancy L Hagedorn, '"A Friend to Go between Them": The Interpreter as Cultural Broker during Anglo-Iroquois Councils, 1740-70' (1988) 35 Ethnohistory 60.

[143] Daniel K Richter, 'Cultural Brokers and Intercultural Politics: New York-Iroquois Relations, 1664-1701' (1988) 75 The Journal of American History 40; Hinderaker (n 142).

[144] See for example, Karen M Gentemann and Tony L Whitehead, 'The Cultural Broker Concept in Bicultural Education' (1983) 52 The Journal of Negro Education 118; Catherine R Cooper, Jill Denner and Edward M Lopez, 'Cultural Brokers: Helping Latino Children on Pathways toward Success' (1999) 9 Future of Children 51; Yomi Braester, 'Chinese Cinema in the Age of Advertisement: The Filmmaker

communication and relationship building across socio-cultural divides. These intermediaries also actively shape cross-cultural communication by playing mediation roles.[145]

In a strict sense, 'interpreter' is a narrow concept not having connotations of culture, and according to professional ethics, interpreters are supposed to provide accurate translation and always remain impartial.[146] Still, many scholars recognise interpreters' cultural brokerage roles on top of facilitating communication. For example, business interpreters' function may extend to providing cultural guidance and conflict mediation.[147] In the medical environment, interpreters serve as co-interviewers in the diagnosis process and educators of healthcare providers in cultural issues, and their role as translators is juggled with other roles including mediator and negotiator.[148] In teaching environment, interpreters may need to actively promote alignment between parties and engage in intercultural mediation.[149] While these studies generally recognise that the roles of interpreter, cultural broker, and mediator are often

as a Cultural Broker' (2005) 183 China Quarterly 549; Y Shaw-Taylor and B Benesch, 'Workforce Diversity and Cultural Competence in Healthcare.' (1998) 5 Journal of Cultural Diversity 138.

[145] Eversole (n 31).

[146] Nancy Schweda Nicholson, 'Professional Ethics for Court and Community Interpreters' in Deanna L Hammond (ed), *Professional Issues for Translators and Interpreters* (John Baenjamins Publishing 1994).

[147] Nobuyuki Chikudate, 'Communication Network Liaisons as Cultural Interpreters for Organizational Adaptation in Japan-Europe Business Environments' (1995) 35 Management and International Review 27.

[148] Brad Davidson, 'The Interpreter as Institutional Gatekeeper: The Social-linguistic Role of Interpreters in Spanish-English Medical Discourse' (2000) 4 Journal of Sociolinguistics 379; Ann Chen Wu and others, 'The Interpreter as Cultural Educator of Residents: Improving Communication for Latino Parents' (2006) 160 Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine 1145; Antonia Arnaert and Geraldine Schaack, 'Cultural Awareness of Inuit Patients' Experiences with Emergency Nursing Care' (2006) 14 Accident and Emergency Nursing 97; Trisha Greenhalgh, Nadia Robb and Graham Scambler, 'Communicative and Strategic Action in Interpreted Consultations in Primary Health Care: A Habermasian Perspective' (2006) 63 Social Science and Medicine 1170.

[149] Elena Davitti, 'Dialogue Interpreting as Intercultural Mediation: Interpreters' Use of Upgrading Moves in Parent–Teacher Meetings' (2013) 15 International Journal of Research and Practice in Interpreting 168.

intertwined, they do not seek to detail the experiences of such intermediaries, for example how they use their personal and networking skills to navigate the cultural boundaries and maintain relationships with different cultural groups.

As for the biculturality of cultural intermediaries, scholarship understands bicultural people as those who identify with more than one distinct culture and have internalised multiple cultural schemas. With their cross-cultural competence, they are capable of acting as the bridge among organisational units of culturally different contexts, drawing upon their cultural knowledge and cross-cultural abilities to effectively switch cultural frames.[150] Furusawa and Brewster reported with surveys how Japanese Brazilians are recruited by Japanese multinational corporations for their cross-cultural competence,[151] and Moore studied the ways in which the Korean British interpreter acted as negotiator and cultural intermediary between Korean and non-Korean organisations.[152] Yet, similar to the works about interpreters, the focus is predominantly on bicultural people's roles and functions in an organisation, rather than their identity awareness and effort of relationship-building. My study, therefore, attempts to fill this gap in scholarship by focusing on the expression and altering of identities as they take up their roles as mediators and cultural brokers.

[150] Mary Yoko Brannen and David C Thomas, 'Bicultural Individuals in Organizations: Implications and Opportunity' (2010) 10 International Journal of Cross Cultural Management 5; Hae Jung Hong, 'Bicultural Competence and Its Impact on Team Effectiveness' (2010) 10 International Journal of Cross Cultural Management 93.
[151] Masayuki Furusawa and Chris Brewster, 'The Bi-Cultural Option for Global Talent Management: The Japanese/Brazilian Nikkeijin Example' (2015) 50 Journal of World Business 133.
[152] Fiona Moore, 'Language, Power and the Liminal: A Korean Translator/Interpreter's Role in Shaping Identities in the London (UK) Business Community' (2015) 4 Journal of Business Anthropology 82.

Those Burmese workers promoted as supervisors are the locally-recruited management personnel for the factory. It is recognised that locally-recruited supervisors possess contributions such as access to local knowledge, networks, and social capital.[153] It is assumed that they can understand local conditions better and manage local operations more effectively, and they are expected to help foreigners break language barrier and penetrate the network of contacts needed to consolidate local presence.[154] Scholars have also identified the issues facing local supervisors under foreign control, particularly their identity crisis and internal struggle. For example, Indian supervisors working in British multinationals had to construct a duality of identity comprising their inner localist self and a 'Westernised' demeanour, which created social distance between themselves and the locals.[155] Local supervisors of foreign-invested enterprises today face similar problems. Singaporean supervisors employed in a French multinational are criticised for their 'lack of assertiveness' and risk-averse nature, and Hui suggests that Singaporean managers are undergirded by organisational power relationships and inequalities deriving from a gap in social and cultural capital.[156] In scholarship, though, with a focus on the obstacles for foreign enterprises seeking to create norms of managerial conduct for local supervisors,[157]

[153] Ron Berger, Chong Ju Choi and Jai Boem Kim, 'Responsible Leadership for Multinational Enterprises in Bottom of Pyramid Countries: The Knowledge of Local Managers' (2011) 101 Journal of Business Ethics 553.
[154] Jos Gamble, 'Localizing Management in Foreign-Invested Enterprises in China: Practical, Cultural, and Strategic Perspectives' (2000) 11 International Journal of Human Resource Management 883.
[155] Nidhi Srinivas, 'Could a Subaltern Manage? Identity Work and Habitus in a Colonial Workplace' (2013) 34 Organization Studies 1655; Robert N St. Clair, 'The Parameters of Second Language Acquisition' in Bernhard Kettemann and Robert N St. Clair (eds), *New Approaches to Language Acquisition* (Narr 1980).
[156] Daphnee Hui Lin Lee, 'Bourdieu's Symbolic Power and Postcolonial Organization Theory in Local-Expatriate Relationships: An Ethnographic Study of a French Multinational Corporation in Singapore' (2013) 61 Current Sociology 341.
[157] Allen Morrison, 'Integrity and Global Leadership' (2001) 31 Journal of Business Ethics 65.

there is insufficient analysis on how socio-cultural contexts and power dynamics work together to influence the relationship between local supervisors and other organisational members. This study answers the call for more research into examining within-organisational dynamics and see multinational enterprises as the empirical testing grounds with regard to advancing systemic perspectives of power.[158]

In short, I identify the bicultural interpreters and locally-recruited supervisors in the Chinese-run multicultural work environment as playing the cultural brokerage role. These intermediaries are frequently placed in difficult positions serving as the bridge between foreign expatriate managers and local workers. In my study, in addition to examining their internal struggles their cultural values and sense of identity, I try to discover how they build relationships across cultural boundaries with both Chinese management and Burmese frontline workers, and how they attempt to address the needs of both sides. Embedded in organisational hierarchy and given authority to govern the workplace, these intermediaries provide a remarkable opportunity to explore the experiences and influences of cultural brokers from a novel perspective.

3. Summary

[158] Mike Geppert, Florian Becker-Ritterspach and Ram Mudambi, 'Politics and Power in Multinational Companies: Integrating the International Business and Organization Studies Perspectives' (2016) 37 Organization Studies 1209; Yunjeong Yang, 'Empowering or Managing the Locals? Within-Organizational Power Relations and Capacity Building of Korean NGOs in Cambodia' [2022] Journal of International Development 1.

Cultural nuances are an important factor in complex and interconnected management-labour relations. This study refrains from referring to culture in ways that quantify culture and use extensive assumptions. It adopts a dynamic conception of culture and emphasises contextual issues, using legal culture as an approach to examine the interaction of meanings in the cross-cultural workplace and identify context-specific behaviour. Through ethnographic methods to examine cultural nuances as experienced by participants from the particular context, I identified valuations in the understandings, perceptions, and expectations of the participants, and through data analysis, this research was able to locate the observations under a number of concepts.

Although these concepts have been discussed in different fields of study, they are not sufficiently nuanced for analysing interactional phenomena, including how people perceive and interpret exchanges across boundaries. The application of these concepts often fails to adequately consider the local context of the workplace or social network, and fails to account for socio-cultural differences in making sense of these concepts. There is insufficient understanding of how sociocultural contexts and power dynamics affect cross-cultural workplace relationships. Nevertheless, these concepts served as the analytical tool to stimulate my thinking and enhance awareness of my data, as I compared and contrasted with the dynamics of social practices observed in the field.

CHAPTER THREE – RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the background and methodology of this research. In order to ascertain the nature of the relationships taking place and to put into perspective what was happening in the site of study, I provide a broad overview of the Chinese presence in Myanmar. To begin, I outline the situation of Chinese investment in Myanmar, and the institutionalised mechanisms available in Myanmar for resolving management-labour conflict. Next, I describe the site of study — a Chinese-run garment factory in Myanmar. Finally, I discuss in detail my research methodology, as well as the various strategies and techniques I employed for generating and analysing data.

1. Research Background

1.1 Chinese Investment in Myanmar

In this research, I chose Myanmar as it is a Southeast Asian country with close economic ties with China that has been reintegrating into the global economy in the recent years.[159] The huge influx of Chinese investment began as soon as Myanmar opened up its economy in the early 2010s, but the two countries have had a well-established tradition of close economic relations. Back in the 1980s, when the Western

[159] China has been Myanmar's biggest trading partner for years and accounted for 40% of Myanmar's total trade in 2015.

world levelled broad economic sanctions on Myanmar following concerns with the military regime's problems with fundamental human rights, China had grasped the opportunity to tighten economic relations with Myanmar, its neighbouring country with great geopolitical significance and abundant deposits of natural resources.[160] Since then, China's rapid economic development has consolidated its position as Myanmar's largest trading partner. Over the period from 1989 to 2015, China (inclusive of Hong Kong in this context) had been the largest home country among foreign investment in Myanmar, accounting for almost half of all realised investment.[161]

Although projects in the natural resource sector still dominate the scene, China's economic transformation is leading to a shift of export-oriented and labour-intensive light-manufacturing from its coastal industrial regions to Myanmar, in particular garment manufacturing. In 2015, approximately half of all registered garment enterprises in Myanmar recorded to be fully or partly foreign owned were from China and Hong Kong.[162] The garment sector now forms the backbone of Myanmar's foreign investment powered light-manufacturing industry. In 2017, the garment sector alone contributed 44% of Yangon's industrial output.[163] Most enterprises in the industry are concentrated in Yangon — Myanmar's largest city and economic hub — and they

[160] Andrzej Bolesta, 'Myanmar-China Peculiar Relationship: Trade, Investment and the Model of Development' (2018) 11 Journal of International Studies 23.
[161] Stephen Gelb, Linda Calabrese and Xiaoyang Tang, 'Foreign Direct Investment and Economic Transformation in Myanmar' (2017).
[162] Myanmar Insider, 'Myanmar Should Lift up Chinese FDI in Garments: Think Tank Suggests' (2017) <https://www.myanmarinsider.com/myanmar-should-lift-up-chinese-fdi-in-garments-think-tank-suggests/> accessed 26 May 2020.
[163] IMC Worldwide, 'Women , Work and Violence in Myanmar , Nepal and Pakistan' (2017).

operate on the basis of cutting, making, and packing (CMP) arrangements, a form of production which raw materials such as fabrics are provided by overseas buyers to be cut, sewn, and packed in the factories to be exported.[164] At the time of fieldwork in 2019, the total number of garment factories in Myanmar reached 533, employing more than 400,000 workers.[165] Given Myanmar's exports was just about 1.5 % of China's, the garment sector is regarded with great anticipation, as Chinese businesses become the driver of future growth.[166] While Myanmar's economy took a hit because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the military coup, it seems the military junta is determined to further depend on China economically to counter Western sanctions, and it is likely that Myanmar would continue to receive significant Chinese investment in the foreseeable future.[167]

Despite the close economic ties, it has been suggested that the Burmese general population has mixed feelings towards people from China. Chinese investment has created job opportunities, facilitated transfer of skills and technology, and contributed to tax revenues. At the same time, anti-Chinese sentiment is on the rise amongst the Burmese population. [168] Chinese enterprises are perceived more unfavourably

[164] Toshirio Kudo, 'Dynamics of the Garment Industry in Low-Income Countries: Experience of Asia and Africa (Interim Report)' (2012).
[165] Yadana Htun, 'World's Biggest Fashion Brands Rally Support for Myanmar Workers' (*NNA Business News*, 2020) <https://english.nna.jp/articles/14891> accessed 27 May 2020.
[166] Myanmar Ministry of Commerce and International Trade Centre, 'National Export Strategy, Textiles and Garments Sector Strategy 2015 - 2019' (2014).
[167] John LIu, 'Myanmar: Months After Coup, China Warms Up to Military Regime' *Foreign Policy* (2021) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/11/17/china-myanmar-military-regime-recognition-investment/> accessed 13 February 2022.
[168] Enze Han, 'Geopolitics, Ethnic Politics along the Border, and Chinese Foreign Policy Changes toward Myanmar' (2017) 13 Asian Security 59; Vanessa Lamb and Nga Dao, 'Perceptions and Practices of Investment: China's Hydropower Investments in Vietnam and Myanmar' (2017) 38 Canadian Journal of Development Studies 395.

compared with other Asian investors,[169] and are criticised for their lack of transparency, problematic labour rights track record, and environmental degradation.[170] This is dismissed by some Chinese voices as 'extreme idealism' that unreasonably prohibits Chinese investment from causing any damage to the environment. Nonetheless, some Chinese enterprises, in face of the criticisms, have reflected on past behaviour and taken some action to improvement relations with the Burmese people, such as strengthening emphasis on ethical business practices and increasing transparency.[171]

1.2 Institutionalised Mechanisms for Labour Dispute Resolution in Myanmar

Maintaining harmonious industrial relations is arguably the most important task facing Chinese garment companies in Myanmar. To adapt to Myanmar's social, cultural, and regulatory environment, they expend efforts and take necessary measures, but strains have emerged in a spate of labour disputes, typically regarding salary and working conditions.[172] A violent labour dispute occurred in 2017 when Burmese workers from a Chinese garment factory demanding better working

[169] Ying Yao and Youyi Zhang, 'Public Perception of Chinese Investment in Myanmar and Its Political Consequences: A Survey Experimental Approach' (2018).
[170] Yuan Wang, 'How Chinese Businesses Are Seen in Myanmar : A Survey of Key Social , Environmental and Development Issues' (2017) 26 Human Rights Defender 17.
[171] Lu Guangsheng and Jin Zhen, 'Myanmar's Economic and Political Transition and Chinese Investment in Myanmar' in Chenyang Li, Chaw Chaw Sein and Xianghui Zhu (eds), *Myanmar: Reintegrating Into The International Community* (World Scientific Publishing 2016).
[172] Nick J Freeman, 'Whither Myanmar's Garment Sector?' (2019).

conditions and benefits destroyed the production line and assaulted the Chinese expatriate managers.[173]

Aware of the possibility that labour disputes may escalate into industrial action, the former Burmese civilian government had established a new legal framework to protect workers' rights, promote good workplace relations, and facilitate resolution of workplace disputes.[174] The 2011 Labour Organization Law legalised the formation of trade unions as part of the broader dispute resolution framework. A state-led institutionalised system for alternative dispute resolution was established by the Settlement of Labour Dispute Law (SLDL) in 2012. Currently, the state-led dispute resolution system in Myanmar is regulated by a three-tier system in which legal action at the court system may only be undertaken after a process of conciliation and arbitration.[175] According to the SLDL, disputes should first be addressed through direct negotiation between employer and employees, via the Workplace Coordinating Committee (WCC). It is mandated by SLDL that employers with more than thirty workers must establish a WCC for negotiating agreements and addressing grievances, and a WCC should be comprised of two employer's representatives nominated by the employer, and two employees' representatives nominated by either the trade union (if there is any) or the employees. When disputes fail to be settled within the workplace through the WCC, they can be brought to the institutionalised system,

[173] Shwe Yee and others, 'H & M Supply Factory in Myanmar Damaged in Violent Labour Protest' *The Guardian* (2017) <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/mar/07/hm-hennes-mauritz-supply-factory-in-myanmar-damaged-in-violent-labour-protest> accessed 6 August 2020.
[174] Dennis Arnold and Stephen Campbell, 'Labour Regime Transformation in Myanmar: Constitutive Processes of Contestation' (2017) 48 Development and Change 801.
[175] Michele Ford and Michael Gillan, 'Industrial Relations Scoping Study: Decent Work in the Garment Sector Supply Chains in Asia' (2017).

beginning from a Township Conciliation Body (TCB) for multi-party hearings, and if disputes fail to be resolved through the TCB, they can be brought to a regional level Arbitration Body (AB), and finally to the state level Arbitration Council (AC).[176]

There has been a growing number of trade unions in Myanmar which are drawing on support from a network of international contacts.[177] In theory, trade unions can help increase workers' awareness of their rights, as well as their capacity to communicate, bargain, and negotiate with employers. In practice, though, Burmese workers have little knowledge of their fundamental rights, including rights related to working hours and overtime payment, and they are unsure of the ways to seek advice and protect themselves against workplace violations.[178] Furthermore, the registration of trade unions at the national level remains a cumbersome and restrictive bureaucratic process, and union membership level in Myanmar still falls way below many other Asian countries.[179] This can be attributed to the legacy of military rule, which resumed in February 2021 after the coup, that people have developed well-founded caution about joining any organisation not directly managed by state authorities.[180] Burmese workers may choose not to participate in trade union fearing the risk of getting fired

[176] Laura Ediger and Chris Fletcher, 'Labor Disputes in Myanmar : From the Workplace to the Arbitration Council' (2017).
[177] Nicholas Henry, 'Everyday Agents of Change: Trade Unions in Myanmar' in Juanita Elias and Lena Rethel (eds), *The Everyday Political Economy of Southeast Asia* (Cambridge University Press 2016).
[178] See Yatu, 'Labor Rights Challenges in Private and Small Enterprises in Yangon, Myanmar' (2018).
[179] See Ford and Gillan (n 175); Min Zar Ni Lin and others, 'Industrial Relations and Workplace Communication in Myanmar Garment Sector' (2019). As of 2015, only 41% of Burmese garment workers confirmed the existence of trade unions in their factories, and 20% confirmed themselves as members of a union. Union membership in Myanmar is the lowest among the fifteen Asian countries surveyed.
[180] Nicholas Henry, 'Trade Union Internationalism and Political Change in Myanmar' (2015) 27 Global Change, Peace and Security 69.

and missing out on promotion opportunities, or they may simply fail to see the advantage of participating, since many trade unions are unable to realise visible improvements in work benefits and conditions.[181]

WCC is the state-designated mechanism for dispute resolution within factories, however, studies about Myanmar's dispute resolution system indicate there are various problems. Many workplaces have not yet established WCCs. Many WCCs only exist on paper and do not function in practice, and workers often have no idea what a WCC is or what it is supposed to do.[182] For the institutionalised mechanisms, it is estimated that in 2016, TCBs across Myanmar received 1,238 cases, ABs received 154 cases, and AC received only 90 cases. [183] Most dispute cases originated in Yangon, and as of 2016, the vast majority of cases were about dismissal and salary.[184] Despite being the primary mechanism providing third party dispute settlement, research has found that most foreign investors believe TCBs are ineffective.[185] At the higher tier of the system, ABs and AC have also been subject to strong criticisms, chiefly for their non-binding rulings and lack of enforcement.[186] While it may be possible for workers dissatisfied with conciliation and arbitration bodies to file a lawsuit, the likelihood of their dispute being resolved in a fair and transparent manner in court is quite low,

[181] Lin and others (n 179); Yatu (n 178).
[182] Progressive Voice, 'Raising the Bottom: A Report on the Garment Industry in Myanmar' (2016).
[183] Ediger and Fletcher (n 176).
[184] Min Zar Ni Lin and Samu Ngwenya, 'From Extractive to Non-Extractive Based Foreign Investment: An Analysis on the Impact of Foreign Direct Investment and Decent Work Conditions in Myanmar' (2019).
[185] ibid.
[186] Daisy Gardener and Jasmine Burnley, 'Made in Myanmar: Entrenched Poverty or Decent Jobs for Garment Workers?' (2015); Sabrina Zajak, 'Law , Labour Disputes and Trade Union Building in Myanmar' (2017); Jinyoung Park, 'Labour Laws in Myanmar' (2014) 83 Asian Labour Update 1.

given the unreformed problems of the Burmese judiciary being politically compromised, opaque, and inaccessible.[187]

Based on analysing the situation in Myanmar, I argue that considering total number of employees, [188] the usefulness of unionisation and institutionalised dispute resolution mechanisms is limited, since they are mostly reserved for a tiny fraction of disputes in Yangon that are very serious and contentious in nature. The majority of management-labour conflicts are the result of minor frictions and grievances that crop up from day-to-day work interactions, and they are exacerbated by the multicultural nature of foreign-owned enterprises. These disagreements are expressed, negotiated, and resolved in non-unionised and non-institutionalised environments. Thus, in this study, rather than looking at courts, tribunals, or trade unions, I examine the workplace of a Chinese-run garment factory. As a result of my prolonged observation of the factory site I was able to determine the issues that factory members were facing and the grievances they held.

2. Site Description

[187] Progressive Voice (n 182).
[188] The total labour force in Myanmar was over 22,000,000 in 2017, and about 10% was employed in the manufacturing sector: See The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 'Annual Labour Force Survey - 2017' (2017).



Figure 1: Location of Pakokku in Myanmar

(Source: gomyanmar.com)

The site chosen is Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd,[189] a Hong Kong Chinese-invested garment enterprise with a medium-sized garment manufacturing establishment located in the city of Pakokku. Fieldwork was conducted from September 2019 to March 2020, before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Myanmar. As of 2020, it employed over 1,200 employees, including twelve Chinese expatriate managers, six

[189] The name has been changed to protect anonymity.

Chinese-Burmese interpreters, and the rest of them Burmese workers. The Chinese managers, before relocating to Myanmar, all had at least ten years of work experience in China's garment factories, mostly in Guangdong (Canton), the province with the highest number of industrial clusters. All of them spoke Mandarin, some could speak Cantonese, but only a few of them could converse in simple Burmese. The Chinese-Burmese interpreters, fluent in both Mandarin and Burmese, were hired as interpreters to facilitate communication between Chinese managers and Burmese workers. Most Burmese workers were young women from, except the mechanics, movers, drivers, and security staff who were male.



Figure 2: The inside of Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd during typical work hours

(Source: the author)

Pakokku is the largest city in the Magway Region of Myanmar, located near the touristy and famous Bagan. The city has a population of over 300,000, with a slightly larger female population, a relatively young population, and a low female labour force participate rate,[190] making it an attractive location for garment factories. During my exploratory visit, I noticed that the city was much less developed than Yangon, Myanmar's biggest city and former capital with more international flavour. Though, as of 2020 at the time of my fieldwork, Pakokku was experiencing economic development from the influx of foreign investment. According to the Chinese managers, foreign investment has brought improvement to the economy of Pakokku, and with increased tax revenue the Pakokku government could start to spend more money on improving basic infrastructure. In short, the Chinese-invested garment factory in Pakokku represents an intriguing example of Chinese-Burmese encounter which is subject to very limited Western influences.

[190] The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 'The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census - Magway Region, Pakokku District' (2017).



Figure 3: A crowded market with hawkers and customers in Pakokku

(Source: the author)



Figure 4: Scene of a typical street in Pakokku

(Source: the author)

While the factory of Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd is located in Pakokku, Myanmar, the headquarter of the enterprise is located in Hong Kong, and the owner is a Hong Kong Chinese businessman. With plenty of similar prior operative experience in China, in 2015, the owner founded the enterprise in Pakokku as a result of his decision to gradually shift manufacturing sites away from China. Although the owner expressed frustration with supply chain challenges and a lack of infrastructure compared with China, Myanmar's strong cost advantage still attracted him to invest in this then newly-opened up economy.

The site represents a great sample where grievances and disputes are mostly resolved in non-unionised and non-institutionalised contexts. As of 2020, no trade union was established. The WCC was present in the workplace, which held irregular meetings to address various issues, and disputes were rarely, if not nearly never, brought to institutionalised state resolution bodies such as the TCB. The grievances that occurred were mostly resolved at the operational level through a range of grievance and dispute management mechanisms, of which would be discussed in the next chapter.

At the planning stage, I thought finding a Chinese-invested factory to agree to my months-long fieldwork would be very difficult. Fortunately, personal networks and prior face-to-face contact with core members of the Hong Kong Myanmar Manufacturers' Association — a chamber of commerce established by Hong Kong garment manufacturers — connected me with a factory owner, who was interested in my project and allowed me to stay at the site, in exchange of my service of teaching English to the Chinese managers and Burmese workers. Before commencing fieldwork, in August 2019 I went on a five-day exploratory trip to visit the site. I met the factory members there for the first time, they were all friendly to me, and the trip had been helpful in gaining trust and support for my research project.

3. Research Method and Data Collection

The question of how variables or aspects of cultural nuances influence management-labour relations in a cross-cultural environment is inherently complex, owing to the

dynamic and context-dependent properties of human interaction. As a locally sensitive and contextual variable, 'culture' is subtle and difficult to study. This research, therefore, turns towards qualitative and process-oriented account to focus on the interaction of meanings and practices on the spaces of everyday encounter. It is based on ethnographic method but combines a variety of techniques to provide qualitative data.

My project does not begin with hypotheses as a point of departure, and my analysis does not focus on examining causal relationships by holding constant or eliminating contextual factors. Rather, with the ethnographic approach, my research emphasises the interplay among variables situated in a naturalistic setting.[191] It dives into the actual world to 'reveal the cultural knowledge working in a particular place and time as it is lived through the subjectivities of its inhabitants.'[192] Over time, my research has developed as I responded adaptively to the findings. In the research process, I identified codes and categories from a continuous interplay between data collection and analysis, and gradually, concepts grounded in my findings were used to explain the social phenomena concerned.

Data collection involves observing production, communication, and conflict management in the factory, as well as conducting semi-structured interviews and analysing documents. Keeping in accordance with the principles of ethnographic

[191] Margaret D LeCompte and Judith Preissle Goetz, 'Problems of Reliability and Validity in Ethnographic Research' (1982) 52 Review of Educational Research 31.
[192] Deborah P Britzman, *Practice Makes Practice: A Critical Study Of Learning To Teach* (2nd edn, State University of New York Press 2003).

inquiry, I did not jump directly into formulating questions or scheduling interviews. Initially, I attended meetings, observed how people communicate, and collected stories from the workplace. Getting a good sense of relationships paved the way for identifying issues in actual practice and reaching beyond the level of mutual stereotypes. As the project developed to the next stage, it became necessary to engage in in-depth discussions. Interviews were conducted to extract more stories and explore the attitudes and feelings towards conflicts. By uncovering additional layers of explanation, and by continuously moving back and forth between empirical data and an emerging analysis, the direction of my research was gradually transformed and recast accordingly.

3.1 Interpretation

As a Hong Konger, I am fluent in both Cantonese and Mandarin, the languages spoken by the Chinese managers and Chinese-Burmese interpreters. However, I encountered some difficulties in communicating with the Burmese workers. At the time of 2019 to 2020, Myanmar was still transitioning out of long-term isolation and reintegrating into the international stage, and foreign researchers in Myanmar might encounter significant language barriers due to the low levels of English proficiency within the local population. During my fieldwork, I learned that, outside of Yangon, the vast majority of Burmese did not have the ability to converse in English, probably with the exception of university students specialising in English-related subjects.

Before beginning fieldwork, I spent a few months learning the Burmese language. With my level of linguistic proficiency, I was able to engage in brief conversations with Burmese workers using simple words. Being able to get around town was convenient, but my Burmese was also beneficial to establishing deeper relationships with the workers. I was able to gain a basic understanding of workplace interactions during my observation. However, in the context of research, my comprehension of Burmese was insufficient to understand the nature of the nuances expressed. Furthermore, my research involves examining culture, which requires a high level of proficiency in the language as well as a deep understanding of cultural concepts and subtleties in locally situated contexts.

Therefore, I invited a local Burmese from Pakokku, the town where the site is located, to serve as my assistant and interpreter during my research. His name is Nay,[193] and he is a graduate of Pakokku University (as he was then) who holds a bachelor's degree in English literature. In addition to being fluent in English, Nay has a few years of experience interpreting for businesses. I primarily relied on him for assistance during interviews with Burmese workers, and he occasionally accompanied me during my observations. As he is of a similar ethnic and geographic background with most of the Burmese workers there, and has knowledge and awareness of the communicative context necessary to grasp the meanings the workers intended to convey, Nay was able to understand and transmit to me certain cultural and linguistic patterns specific to the background of the Burmese workers. Additionally, participants found it easier

[193] This is a pseudonym.

to relate to him, which led to friendly short chats between participants and him before interviews in order to help them relax and prepare for the discussion.

Nay has a sociable character, however at the continuum proposed by Edwards whereby the assistant interpreter either acts in a completely independent manner to control the interview, or simply acts like a translator of words,[194] I found that Nay's outgoing personality made him a bit too 'active' at the beginning stage of fieldwork. When translating my questions, sometimes he tried to add his own elaborations to lead the participant. When translating the participants' answers, he was prone to summarise what the participants answered in shorter sentences. He was sort of becoming a 'bridge' to deliver what I wanted to hear, and he was missing out on the thinking processes and emotions of participants. He also displayed a variety of emotions in response to the answers, which I thought would not only influence the participants, but would also let himself become influenced and lose impartiality.

Addressing the above issues and reflecting on the interpreter's role in this research, I took some measures to mitigate my dependence on Nay's influence. Prior to commencing fieldwork, I held training sessions with Nay to explain the aim and background of my research. After fieldwork began, I had brief discussions with him after each interview. We revisited the issues discussed, reflected upon the interview process, and looked if there was any room for improvement. Mid-fieldwork discussions were held to reconfirm his roles and his understanding of the research to

[194] Rosalind Edwards, 'A Critical Examination of the Use of Interpreters in the Qualitative Research Process' (1998) 24 Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 197.

achieve standardisation of the translation approach. Even though I suggested Nay to interpret cultural aspects and decode cultural complexities behind the words spoken, I emphasised to him that his primary role was to provide accurate translation, both for me and for the participants. The discussions were helpful that Nay was reminded to change his style and carry out interpretation in a more accurate and appropriate manner. After I raised the issues to his concern, he adjusted quickly to translate as precisely as possible what the participants said, including the ways they said it, and he also minimised his emotional response to participants.

In line with the approach of my research to treat the interpreter as an informant, approaching the end of fieldwork, Nay was interviewed by me to gather his reflections on the research process. I asked him about his views on the impact of the factory on the local population, and other issues he saw as important in relation to the research. The interpreter's involvement was extended to the process of data analysis, as he was invited to provide some explanations to the observations that I have made. Aware of the possibility that he might exert excessive influence over data generation and analysis, I was careful not to take him for granted. In the process of data analysis, I critically examined Nay's contribution, realising that his cultural understanding was also subjective and susceptible to biases. His contribution became part of my material to be checked and verified in my research, with help from literature on Burmese culture and a few of my Burmese friends. The interpreter's gender, age, social background, education level, and his perception of the relationship with me was also taken into consideration.

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 Participant Observation

A major part of data gathering in the site involves everyday observation of factory activity. As the thrust of this study rests on detailed accounts of the interaction-rich workplace, and the cultural dimension of management-labour relations observable within everyday life situation or setting, participant observation is therefore an appropriate methodology. I resided in the factory accommodation and undertook observation for a period of about six months, from September 2019 to late March 2020 before the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I observed factory practices in different sections, shadowed factory members in all aspects of their jobs, and invited them to share their workplace experiences and stories in a casual manner. I was able to understand the nuances of production activities and interpersonal communication. More importantly, for the purpose of this research, I learnt about the grievances, tensions, and disputes, including how cultural visions contributed to their emergence, and how were they addressed at the workplace. The culturally-informed mutual expectations, and the assessment of rights and wrongs, all had an impact on the formation and maintenance of relationships at the cross-cultural workplace.

I attended the regular production meetings, and typically in these occasions, first the Chinese managers would critical assess sectional and line performance, then the Burmese workers would explain their work problems, followed by the Chinese managers addressing these problems and explaining how performance should be improved. I observed the communication between Burmese workers and Chinese managers, which at times revealed the presence of tensions and grievance feelings. I also had casual chats with the Burmese workers and Chinese managers, both inside and outside work setting. Burmese workers shared with me the issues they encountered, particularly concerning the behaviour of Chinese managers which they perceived as unreasonable and unfair. Chinese managers often complained to me about how difficult it was to manage the workers and solve the myriad of problems at the shop floor. The Chinese-Burmese interpreters, especially those in the administrative section, were helpful in explaining to me the communication problems, complaints, and disciplinary issues that produced stress for the factory members.

During my stay at the site, I was given a great deal of freedom. I was permitted access to most parts of the factory. I had the opportunity to observe any briefing sessions and meetings held by the Chinese managers, and sometimes they even invited me to participate in their meetings. As I was aware that my active involvement might impact communication between workers and affect how it is conducted in my absence, I observed from a distance so as to avoid disturbing those at work, but occasionally I asked questions out of curiosity. The general atmosphere was welcoming. As I could talk to anyone I wanted, I sought opportunities to speak with people during lunch

breaks and other times of free time. Almost all of them were pleased to speak with me and answer my questions. After receiving approval from the Chinese manager of the administrative section, I was able to gain access to internal documents of the factory as well.

I made detailed field notes during my observations, which included key components of observed settings, events, and interactions. As well as paying attention to the words spoken, I also paid attention to the emotional expressions and non-verbal communication. All important words, phrases, and dialogue have been preserved as accurately as possible. Due to my field observations, I was able to gain a better understanding of the meanings, perceptions, and expectations that people derived from management-labour relationships, thus altering the direction of my research as I identified the pertinent real-life issues. I later developed and refined the various themes to be discussed during the interviews based on the observations.

Aside from being an observer, I assumed a few participating roles in the factory. I taught workplace English to both Chinese managers and Burmese workers. I assisted as an interpreter when foreign clients and quality control inspectors visited the factory, since my English proficiency enabled me to communicate with them and answer their challenging questions. Through prolonged stay at the site, I appeared to have transformed myself from an 'outsider' to more of an 'insider.' I was quick to establish close relationship with the Chinese managers, probably because we could communicate easily in Mandarin. I was often invited to have lunch with them, so there

were plenty of opportunities to meet and chat. I was invited to their social events outside the work setting, such as snack gatherings, karaoke, and cooking sessions.

The Burmese workers, comparatively, were a bit harder to approach. The people in Myanmar are friendly, generous, and happy to help foreigners. However, it should be noted that Myanmar has been identified as a society with rigidly structured social order, and there is tendency for the Burmese people to quickly judge others based on initial impression and their perceived status in the social hierarchy.[195] When I first arrived in the factory, many Burmese workers lowered their heads when they walked past me, which was a social etiquette in Myanmar suggesting that I was perceived as foreigner of higher social status. I was aware at the beginning of fieldwork that the perceived power difference between me and the Burmese workers might be significant. Due to my ethnic Chinese origin, I was probably more identified with the managerial role and was placed at a higher position of the perceived social hierarchy. In a society where education usually comes with higher status, my identity as a foreign doctoral researcher was probably seen automatically as in a position of power.

I understood that the key to establishing trust and rapport in this context was to reduce the perceived power difference. Therefore, with reference to the suggestions by Aléx and Hammarström, I presented myself casually to the Burmese workers, such that symbols related to a dominant discourse like dressing up, presenting myself in a

[195] Stephen McCarthy, 'Rule of Law Expedited: Land Title Reform and Justice in Burma (Myanmar)' (2018) 42 Asian Studies Review 229.

formal manner, and the use of academic jargons, were avoided.[196] I tried to avoid being seen as sticking with the Chinese managers. As I stayed in the factory longer and mingled with the Burmese workers, they became more comfortable to engage in small talks with me. I was sometimes invited to religious events, dinners, and 'house parties,' usually accompanied by Chinese-Burmese interpreters. This provided opportunities for me to learn more about their 'social code' and understand the deeper meanings behind their actions. I reminded myself to respect Burmese people's tradition and never try to challenge their religious customs and worldview.

During my stay at the site, I noticed that Burmese workers would share gossips and stories of grievances with each other. When they felt overstressed, too tired, or a bit unwell during work hours, they might ask for approval to take a rest at the factory clinic. The factory nurse, Mar Zin Than, was a popular figure that the workers would share their problems with. While getting treated at the clinic for ailment, the workers often complained to her about the things that they did not like about work. Describing herself to be 'like a counsellor,' Mar Zin Than said after listening to the workers sharing their problems, she would react by showing some empathy and giving supporting and comforting words to make them feel better. From Mar Zin Than, I was able to learn some common grievance feelings experienced by the Burmese workers.

Sharing gossip and troubles was not exclusively a matter of the Burmese workers. After work hours, quite often the Chinese managers would gather in the factory

[196] Lena Aléx and Anne Hammarström, 'Shift in Power during an Interview Situation: Methodological Reflections Inspired by Foucault and Bourdieu' (2008) 15 Nursing Inquiry 169.

accommodation's dining area sharing snacks and chatting about the things they had come across in the workplace. Frictions and troubles with Burmese workers were among the most popular topics discussed. The atmosphere of these gatherings appeared to be pleasant, and Chinese managers spoke words expressing empathy and encouragement to each other. In addition to learning more about the dynamics of workplace relationships, chatting with the Chinese managers provided me with opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of their culturally shaped values, perceptions, and visions.

While I was at the field, I realised that formal consent procedures and paperwork, suggested by many researchers to be obtrusive and intimidating,[197] were not helpful in building rapport with factory members and narrowing perceived hierarchical distance. To address the problem, I used more casual and flexible oral consent procedures. I ensured participants could maintain control over their manner of participation, by explaining to them and reminding them that their participation was voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw anytime during the process. Participant information sheets written in simple language were circulated among factory members to explain to them briefly about my identity, research purpose, and the data generation method.

[197] Jane Zavisca, 'Ethics in Ethnographic Fieldwork' (2007) 4 Forum for Anthropology and Culture 127; Richard Hugman, Linda Bartolomei and Eileen Pittaway, 'Human Agency and the Meaning of Informed Consent: Reflections on Research with Refugees' (2011) 24 Journal of Refugee Studies 655.

Despite my efforts to become an 'insider' in the factory, I intentionally positioned myself in a peripheral role to limit my involvement with factory members, becoming 'with' rather than 'part of' or 'like' any group in the factory. It is suggested by Johnson, Avenarius and Weatherford that active and complete participation in research can open doors to a whole range of other groups and events, greatly influencing the potential reliability and diversity of data collected.[198] Nevertheless, I was more concerned that such active to complete involvement might result in difficulty in adopting an analytical stance. For example, my close relationship with factory members cleared the way for me to understand them deeply, and in small talks they often vented their frustrations to me, including rumours and stereotypical beliefs about members of another culture. While these represented a valuable source of data, getting immersed in them excessively made it difficult for me to disengage from the field, and my ability to approach analysis reflexively would likely be affected. Hence, limiting my involvement to a moderate level was an important means to preserve my ability as a researcher to interpreter data from a detached perspective.

3.2.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Another major part of data collection involves the use of semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are well-suited for the purpose of obtaining descriptions, perceptions, and opinions of respondents to interpret the complex meaning of phenomena. As I have mentioned, following common practice in ethnographic

[198] Jeffrey C Johnson, Christine Avenarius and Jack Weatherford, 'The Active Participant-Observer: Applying Social Role Analysis to Participant Observation' (2006) 18 Field Methods 111.

enquiry, I first conducted participant observation for about two weeks, then began with the interviews while continuing observation. This arrangement allowed me to identify the real-life themes that had emerged and were of importance to the participants, and effectively provided a foundation to develop protocols and formulate questions to be used in interviews. The interviews enriched what I gained from my observation and gave me a better understanding of the meanings and latent nuances of perceptions.

I developed an interview guide with a focused structure for discussion and a number of questions that cover the main topics of study, but with reference to the recommendation of several qualitative researchers, the form of the guide was intentionally made to be loose and flexible, and the questions were designed to be open-ended, clearly worded, and not leading, allowing data to be produced and new concepts to emerge.[199] For example, I asked what kind of first impressions did the participants have towards factory members of another culture, and I asked participants to describe some incidences of frictions, disputes, and conflicts that they had witnessed or experienced. During interviews, the sequencing of questions was participant-led, and I asked follow-up questions relative to what was seen as significant replies. In fact, follow-up questions dominated a major part of interviews, unless the participants were very shy about sharing their views. The use of such semi-

[199] Hanna Kallio and others, 'Systematic Methodological Review: Developing a Framework for a Qualitative Semi-Structured Interview Guide' (2016) 72 Journal of Advanced Nursing 2954; Daniel W Turner, 'Qualitative Interview Design: A Practical Guide for Novice Investigators' (2010) 15 Qualitative Report 754; Christine Dearnley, 'A Reflection on the Use of Semi-Structured Interviews.' (2005) 13 Nurse researcher 19.

structured format of interviews offered considerable reciprocity between me and the participants, creating space for me to ask participants for clarification, meaning making, and critical reflection. Taking the view of interview as research instrument to be conducted with an 'ethnographic imaginary,' the interviews overall were about me listening attentively to the beliefs, values, material conditions, and social forces that underwrite the behavioural patterns of participants, along with an analytic focus on their lived experience.[200] During interviews, I tried to minimise my influence on participants by acting receptively and avoiding the display of emotional responses. This also helped to address the problem of asymmetric power relations, since I was the one with power to define the interview situation and set the agenda.

With cooperation from the factory, I could invite anyone in the factory to participate, and most of them showed up for the scheduled interviews, although not always on time due to work commitments. By the end of my fieldwork in late March 2020, I conducted a total of fifty-seven semi-structured interviews: forty-five with Burmese workers, four with Chinese-Burmese interpreters, and eight with Chinese expatriate managers. The length of interviews lasted from about forty to ninety minutes. Most interviews were conducted in a quiet conference room at the factory office. The venue had a formal atmosphere, but it provided a sense of visual and aural privacy to the participants, as the venue was acoustically secure from those by whom participants would not like to be overheard.

[200] Reference is made to Jenny Hockey and Martin Forsey, 'Ethnography Is Not Participant Observation: Reflections on the Interview as Participatory Qualitative Research' in Jonathan Skinner (ed), *The Interview: An Ethnographic Approach* (A&C Black 2014); Denzin and Lincoln (n 82).

Interviews were audio-recorded with consent from participants and fully transcribed, in order to capture more fully and more specifically the lived realities and every-day phenomenon I wish to study. Before obtaining their consent, I explained clearly to participants that the interviews would be anonymous, and I emphasised that the data including recordings would only be used in a generalised manner during my analysis and would not be disclosed to anyone. Some participants were hesitant at first, a few of them refused, but the vast majority agreed without hesitations. The audio recorder was put out of sight to reduce participants' potential discomfort. After some informal 'warm-up' questions about participants' lives designed to create a more relaxed atmosphere, participants started to loosen up, and after about five to ten minutes they appeared to have forgotten about the audio-recording.

Each interview began with some casual 'chit-chat' to lighten the atmosphere and establish rapport, followed by brief discussion between me and the potential participants about the nature and objective of my research, possible risks associated with participation, potential use of data provided, and confidentiality issues. After a few 'warm-up' questions about the lives and background information of participants such as family condition, role, job responsibility, and previous jobs, participants were invited to share in detail their experiences in the factory by telling stories. Interviews with Chinese managers and Chinese-Burmese interpreters were conducted in either Cantonese or Mandarin. Interviews with Burmese workers were conducted in both Burmese and English, with the interpreter assisting in the whole process. Hypothetical

questions about how participants would react to potential grievance circumstances were also used to verify my findings.

Upon invitation, most factory members were willing to participate in interviews and talk about their experiences in great details. Interviews for Chinese managers and Burmese Chinese interpreters took place in the evening after work hours, but interviews for Burmese workers had to take place during work hours, as they were anxious about having to travel late at night after finishing the interviews. Putting reciprocity into practice and weighing up the pros and cons of providing financial reimbursement, I covered the costs that arose for disrupting the normal work schedule of Burmese workers. This was given in a transparent manner and expressed as a token of gratitude for their help in my research project.

Extending the idea of reciprocity, I believe that while the interviews mainly served to benefit me as a researcher, the participants gained something non-pecuniary from the interviews as well. It is suggested by Hoffmann that anonymity provides a safe outlet for participants to share their stories.[201] Despite some possible feelings of anxiety and nervousness, I sort of became a 'sympathetic ear' to the participants, and I offered an opportunity for them to talk about topics in relation to the workplace that they might not be able to discuss with others at ease. For example, as a way of 'letting off steam,' Chinese managers vented to me their disappointment about the job performance and attitude of Burmese workers. Burmese workers, on the flip side of the coin, took the

[201] Elizabeth A Hoffmann, 'Open-Ended Interviews, Power, and Emotional Labor' (2007) 36 Journal of Contemporary Ethnography 318.

opportunity to talk about their frustrated feelings towards Chinese, a few of them thanked me for taking the time to listen to their stories. Some workers even asked me to deliver message to the Chinese managers of the administrative section. Those were suggestions and complaints that the workers themselves were probably a bit reluctant to make in person.

For the most part, I noticed that the Chinese managers and Chinese-Burmese interpreters were quite honest and open about sharing their feelings and perceptions towards other groups. They were more comfortable recollecting memories of grievances and expressing negative views to me. This was probably because we could communicate directly without involving interpreters, and I was considered 'closer to them' because of my ethnic Chinese identity. In comparison, Burmese workers were more defensive in their responses and demonstrated certain degrees of reluctance to share their thoughts. Some workers seemed nervous and uneasy. They were particularly cautious about revealing their views of Chinese managers and describing previous frictions, possibly out of fear of potential work-related consequences, and the suspicion that I am also ethnically Chinese and might inform the Chinese managers of the things discussed during interviews. I consider this to be relevant to the Burmese cultural phenomenon of '*anade*,' which I will discuss in the coming chapters, such that the Burmese workers were trying to avoid embarrassment or confrontational situations by being indirect in their responses. Facing questions related to issues that were considered 'sensitive,' instead of showing their genuine feelings with an outright refusal to answer, Burmese workers often used various

indirect means to reject me, for example giving irrelevant answers, repeating those irrelevant answers, or simply answering 'I don't really know what to say,' despite me and my interpreter's clarification. It was also quite common for them to give inconsistent answers about their feelings and attitudes, or some brief and generic answers such as 'They're good,' 'I'm okay' that fell short of my expectations.

I dealt with this issue carefully. I reassured to the Burmese participants that all responses would be kept anonymous. When they refused to answer my questions in an indirect manner, I did not lose patience and try to probe for more information, since this would likely cause increased feelings of distress and frustration. I avoided the use of direct questions, because the use of assertive interview techniques to extract data with a 'straight-to-the-point' approach might cause serious hesitation of the Burmese participants about inconveniencing me. Rather, I tried to learn the feelings, perceptions, expectations, and context-sensitive phenomena through more indirect questions, such as hypothetical questions, as discussed above. I also did not completely take the words spoken at face value. I noted the non-verbal clues such as indicators of anxiety, frustration, and uncertainty, which might reveal more of the intended meanings than the verbal response. I felt that approaching the end of the interviews, I and my assistant interpreter were able to evoke a more relaxed and candid set of responses to the questions.

3.2.3 Document Analysis

Using internal documents from the factory including incident reports, warning notices, and meeting minutes, I was able to validate and deepen my understanding of the findings from observation and interview. There were numerous incident reports describing minor accidents that occurred in the factory, how the factory handled the incident, and suggestions for improving workplace safety. Warnings issued by Chinese managers to Burmese workers detailed 'misbehaviour' of workers, such as being late for work or absent without reason. Minutes of the management team, workers' representative committee, and environmental safety team meetings were useful in learning about workers' complaints and decisions made by management.

As an example, the workers complained about the lack of overtime work, the stuffy environment in the packing section, and the water quality in the drinking fountains. The management made several decisions in meetings prohibiting things such as packages being brought into the factory, eating and drinking at work, putting on '*thanaka*' (a traditional Burmese cosmetic paste made from ground bark), and selling products. The workers disagreed with some of these decisions, such as the prohibition of packages, since workers without motorcycles are required to ask friends to purchase things for them and deliver them to the factory for them to pick up.

3.3 Data Analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed as abovementioned, and all field notes taken during participant observation, originally in hand-written form,

were typed into computer. Transcription of each interview was usually completed the same day it was conducted. All data were imported into the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, for coding and analysis. Using such software in the data analysis process added rigour and validity by allowing me to carry out quick and accurate searches and ensuring all instances of a particular usage are found; it also made organising data much more efficient than manual handling.

I started data analysis from the early phrase of fieldwork. My initial analysis involved detailed, slow, and reflective exploration of the texts, in order to contemplate the possible meanings and identify new concepts. I began by coding on simpler and broader concepts like 'perceptions,' 'expectations,' 'disputes,' and 'resolution.' More concepts emerged as I made progress in my fieldwork, and broader concepts were broken down into sub-categories. For example, the concept of 'resolution' was refined into sub-categories like 'formal,' 'informal,' 'position in workplace hierarchy,' and 'job performance.' When I conducted analysis, some sub-categories were lumped together under an umbrella concept, for example 'leapfrogging' and 'position at the workplace hierarchy' came together under 'social order,' which was about the perception of structuring characteristic of social interactions. The concepts that emerged from data at the later stage of fieldwork, such as 'views on fairness,' 'expectations about leadership,' and 'attitude towards rules,' shaped the interview questions and led to the formulation of themes that eventually became part of my analytical framework.

CHAPTER FOUR – THE CHINESE-MANAGED MULTICULTURAL WORKPLACE

In order to lay the groundwork for discussing the dynamics of management-labour relations, this chapter introduces the space and social context in which the interactions took place and the available means to channel grievances when and if they emerge as part of that dynamic. To begin with, I give an overview of the factory's operation, describing the different sections of this Chinese-run factory. The following explains how the language barrier posed a significant challenge to factory members, and what practices, strategies, and systems of cross-cultural communication and management were used to overcome the challenges and facilitate factory operations. The purpose of this is to provide the basis for a detailed discussion in the coming chapters regarding the nuances in perceptions and understandings expressed in everyday work practice. Lastly, to provide some insight into the dynamics of conflict management in the factory, I describe both the non-institutionalised and institutionalised mechanisms used to address grievances and disputes, and I examine when and how these mechanisms were used by the factory members.

1. Factory Backdrop and Production Processes

The factory of Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd, like most garment factories in Myanmar, is operated as an export-oriented 'CMP (Cut, Make, Package) business' that manufactured and shipped products under contract to overseas buyers. The most

important characteristic of CMP businesses was that they typically would not manufacture any raw materials themselves. Instead, for the garment manufacturing process, all necessary raw materials, such as fabrics, sewing threads, yarn, lace, hang tags, were purchased from overseas suppliers.[202] The business operation of garment factories with CMP arrangements thus would incur only production costs, such as wages, electricity and diesel, transportation, communication, maintenance of sewing machines, and administrative expenses.[203]

According to the Hong Kong Chinese owner, the factory of Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd was very similar to his garment factories in China: employing Chinese managers, using factory arrangements developed in China, and sourcing supplies primarily from China. In line with the CMP business model, the factory floors of the factories were divided into different sections, with the three production sections being the cutting, sewing, and packing sections.

[202] The factory does differ from typical CMP arrangements in one important aspect. It sources raw materials from selected suppliers, with approval from the overseas contract buyer. It is believed that if raw materials are supplied by the buyer like the typical CMP arrangements, the whole logistics process will be harder to control, and the buyer will effectively control the whole supply chain, knowing the price, cost of exactly everything of the business. (Interview 2, Hong Kong Chinese director)

[203] Toshihiro Kudo, 'Location Advantages and Disadvantages in Myanmar: The Case of Garment Industry' (2009) No 203 IDE Discussion Papers 3.

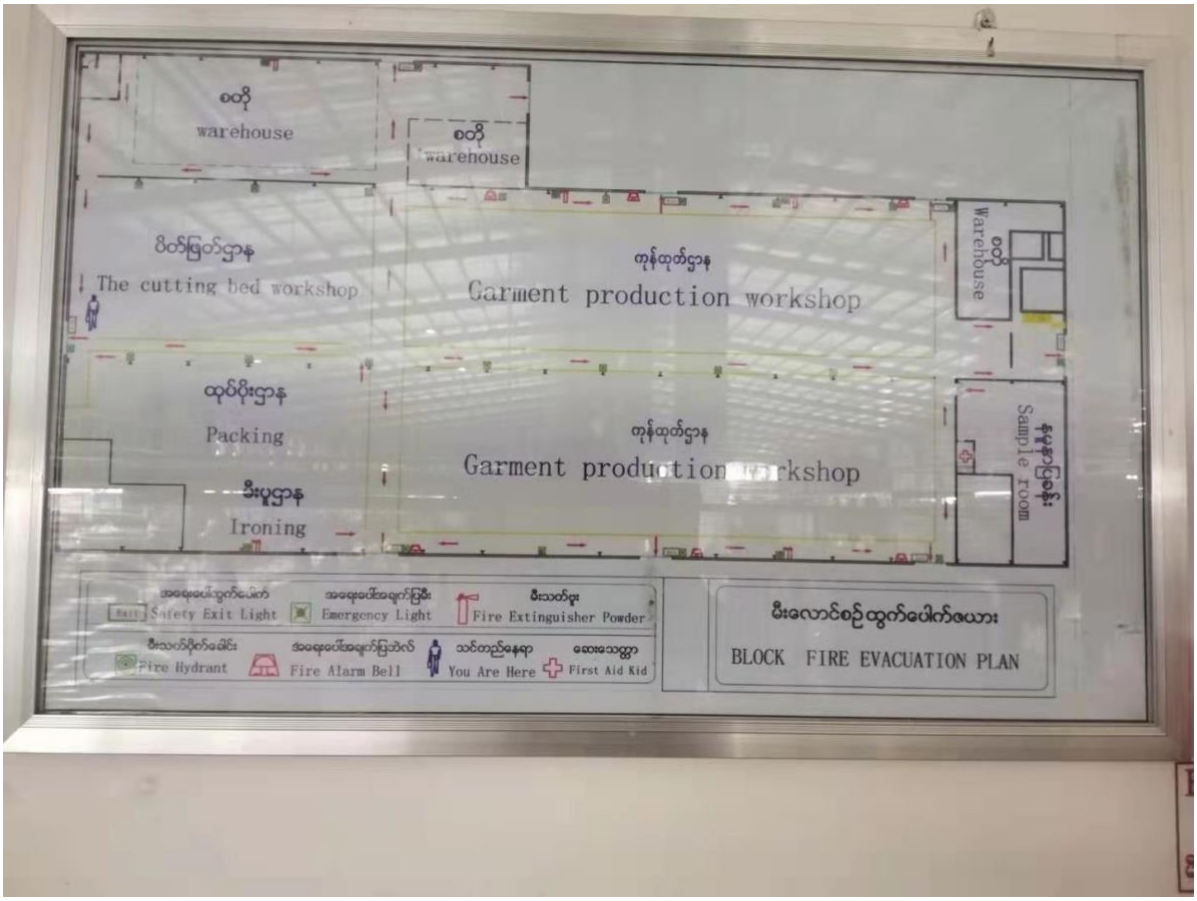

Figure 5: Floor plan of the shop floor of Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd

(Source: the author)

Cutting Section

The cutting section covers the cutting bed workshop and the warehouse. The garment manufacturing process begins when the cutting section, responsible for the purchase, storage, and cutting of fabric, prepares garment panels ready for use in the sewing section. Fabric is cut by workers using computerised cutting machines, semi-automatic straight knife or bend knife cutting machines, and scissors, at different worktables. The completed garment panels are then promptly delivered to the production lines of the sewing section. Because production at the sewing section

depends heavily upon a steady supply of necessary garment panels, the cutting section need to carefully review customer orders, forecast fabric demand, and plan the purchase of raw materials, and most importantly, ensure the garment panels prepared are consistently of the correct size, shape, colour, and pattern as needed in production. The division of labour is clear, and all workers are assigned a specific manual task to work on. To keep the sewing section, and hence the entire production process going, the cutting section must supply sufficient garment panels on time, and for this reason, I observed that Burmese workers in this section frequently had to work overtime and followed the production schedule very closely.

As of March 2020, the section consisted of about forty frontline workers, two junior supervisors, and two senior supervisors, all of them of Burmese origin and hired locally at Pakokku.[204] There was no Chinese-Burmese interpreter stationed in the cutting section. The supervisors, in addition to performing cutting tasks, were responsible for overseeing section activities, assigning minor tasks to workers, reporting to the Chinese manager, and teaching, instructing, and supervising frontline workers. One Chinese manager was responsible for managing the whole section and designating the work targets, plans, and workers' tasks allocation, with reference to supplies inventory, customer orders, and production progress in the sewing section.

[204] In 2020 when the fieldwork was carried out, the factory already had plans to further expand in size. The number of workers, supervisors, and Chinese managers in each section might have increased by now, depending on implementation of the plan.

I observed that at the cutting section, the only Chinese manager spent most of his time in his section office on tasks like making the patterns, examining the samples, and following up on procurement and production plans. Occasionally, he would go out to the workshop to oversee the place, inspect the machines, and solve issues encountered by workers. The Burmese workers, including supervisors, usually had to visit the section office to communicate with him. Communication between them and the Chinese managers was chiefly facilitated with help of interpreters from other sections.

Sewing Section

The sewing section comprises of the garment production workshop. The completed garments parts, together with other supplies, are delivered to the sewing section for the next production step. The sewing section is the core unit in the garment production process, responsible for sewing and trimming different cut pieces into completed garment with sewing machines. Adopting a 'flow production system,' the section is organised into thirty production lines, each line comprises of about twenty to twenty-five sewing machine operators (frontline workers). As an operator completes her work on a garment part, the garment is immediately passed to the next worker, until the garment 'flies' and reaches the finishing section of the production line, where the quality control workers carry out inspection.

As of March 2020, this largest section of the factory had over eight hundred Burmese workers with different sewing tasks. Two Chinese-Burmese interpreters were assigned to the sewing section, involving in important work communication between

Chinese managers and Burmese workers. Each production line had two junior supervisors and one senior supervisor, all of them of local Burmese origin. I observed that unlike the cutting section, the Burmese supervisors in the sewing section did not perform production tasks. They were chiefly responsible for teaching and supervising operators, solving minor operational problems, reporting to Chinese managers, and keeping production at a stable level. The supervisors were made accountable for the production quantity of their respective production lines, and the three Chinese managers in the sewing section, each managing ten to fifteen lines, held frequent meetings with the supervisors of their lines to review progress, evaluate performance, and identify as well as solve problems.

Unlike the cutting section manager, managers of the sewing section spent most of their time at the workshop producing new samples, overseeing production, delivering instructions, and solving problems. At this section, I observed more frequent interaction between Chinese managers and Burmese supervisors, because the Chinese managers could usually be found at the production lines, as they had to ensure production was smooth, quantity was accurate, and quality was up to standard. Communication was mostly about Burmese workers reporting progress and seeking approval from Chinese managers, or Chinese managers criticising performance of supervisors concerning their supervision skills and productivity of frontline workers. Although interpreters were typically required to facilitate communication, compared with other sections, there was more direct communication between the Burmese supervisors and the Chinese managers in simple Mandarin and Burmese.

Packing Section

The packing section covers the packing, ironing, and storage areas. After production at the sewing section, the completed garments are delivered to the packing section for the final step in the production process. The packing section processes the completed garments to enhance protection and prepare for shipment to customers. Work at this section begins with ironing completed garments upon delivery from the sewing section, then followed by sorting, counting, and quantity recording. The garments are then put through processes such as attaching hang tags and polybagging. Once the garments are folded and put into polybags, they are cartooned, and the male workers load the carton boxes with the completed garments onto the truck exporters. This point marks the end of the garment production process, as the completed garments are shipped away from the factory, eventually reaching customers overseas.

This section, as of March 2020, had about fifty frontline workers assigned with a wide array of tasks, the majority of them were female workers, with a few male workers mostly responsible for moving carbon boxes onto the trucks. I noticed that with the division of labour, the packing section was further divided by the management into two groups, one for processing nightwear, and one for brassiere. Each group had one junior supervisor and one senior supervisor, all of them local Burmese, and their roles were similar to supervisors in the cutting section, such that they also had to perform production tasks themselves. But unlike the cutting section, the packing section had a Chinese-Burmese male interpreter stationed for providing interpretation, and he also

performed tasks like the other frontline workers. One Chinese manager oversaw the whole section, and other than leading his team, he had to coordinate closely with the sewing section to ensure the delivery deadlines were met.

The Chinese managers spent approximately the same amount of time at the section office and packing areas. At the office, he was mostly checking the production plans on a computer, and at the workshop, he was inspecting the packaged products, delivering instructions, and overseeing progress to ensure shipping deadlines could be met. At this section, the Chinese-Burmese interpreter played a very active role facilitate communication. He was ordered to provide interpretation many times a day, while also assigned the tasks of packing products and moving them onto the delivery truck. Direct communication between the Chinese manager and his Burmese staff was limited, mainly that he was not very keen about approaching them. I noticed that the Burmese workers, even the supervisors, looked nervous when trying to approach him and report work issues.

Non-CMP Sections

In addition to the CMP departments, there are three smaller non-CMP sections that play crucial roles in the factory. In contrast to the CMP sections, which are managed in a more systematic manner, the non-CMP sections have a more flexible structure.

First, the maintenance section is chiefly responsible for maintenance of the sewing machines and adjusting them to prepare for different production tasks. 'Flow

production system' at the sewing section means that production activities of a production line may be affected even if one sewing machine breaks down, therefore the maintenance section must have the machine repaired as soon as possible to minimise disruption to production. All members of this section are mechanics, and responsibilities of the section further extend to maintenance of utilities, such as remodelling, painting, plumbing, and electrical work in the factory. This section has a working area in the sample room that contains a lot of equipment and tools for the mechanics to use.

As of March 2020, I observed twelve frontline workers, four supervisors, all of whom were Burmese and male. There was one Chinese-Burmese male interpreter assigned to the section. As machinery and factory maintenance require highly skilled and trained mechanics, there were quite a few Chinese managers overseeing the workers, all of whom were male and performed maintenance tasks themselves. In comparison with other sections, I observed a rarity of direct communication between Chinese managers and Burmese staff without the assistance of interpreters. The reason for this is because the conversation about machinery involves a great deal of technical terms and complicated mechanisms that are difficult for majority monolingual Chinese and Burmese mechanics to communicate in a second language. They are responsible for maintaining different production lines and different areas of the factory, so it is not easy for them to meet each other frequently.

Second, the cleaning and security section is responsible for a variety of tasks. As of March 2020, there were three workers, all of them middle-aged local Burmese women and their duty was to always keep all areas of the factory clean and tidy. I observed that the four security guards, mostly middle-aged men except for one middle-aged women, were assigned duties to patrol the factory to prevent unauthorised persons from entering the factory area, and to monitor the workers to reduce problems such as smoking in the toilets, littering, or theft. No Chinese-Burmese interpreters or Chinese managers were assigned to this section. The section members communicated directly in Burmese and no interpreter was necessary.

Finally, the administrative section is responsible for all administrative and supporting functions of the factory, such as human resources, accounting and finance, information technology, public relations, regulatory compliance, product specifications, and orders processing. As of March 2020, there were about ten Burmese clerical staff, almost all of them young women except for a male IT support technician. Three Chinese managers were assigned to this section. One was the factory general manager trusted by the owner to oversee the entire factory's important administrative matters and communicating with Burmese government officials, one was always in the office handling electronic communication with clients and suppliers, and one was responsible for checking the production specification and product samples delivered to the factory. There were two Chinese-Burmese interpreters, with one of them handling internal affairs of assisting the Chinese managers and carrying out administrative tasks, and the other one chiefly handling external affairs of running

errands and liaising with government officials, inspectors, and other visitors. Despite being in the same section with constant presence of interpreters, the Chinese and Burmese members have limited direct communication with each other, as the Chinese managers are busy with their duties, and the Burmese staff are assigned simple routine tasks to perform on their own, such as writing and maintaining spreadsheets. Interpreters in this section are among the most active of all sections, as they not only provide interpretation, but also assist the Chinese managers and are assigned administrative tasks to perform on their own.

The administrative section has the most frequent communication with Hong Kong Chinese owners among all sections. Critical issues relating to the factory are reported to the administrative section first, before being reported to the owners by the administrative section, and vice versa for instructions from the owners. The offices of this section are located on the second floor rather than the production floor, and this likely indicates that the section enjoys considerable power as a result of its close relationship with the factory owners, as it controls almost all aspects of the manufacturing process. The important management meetings are held in the conference room of the administrative section's second-floor office, and most Burmese workers from other sections, including the supervisors, rarely visit the second-floor offices.

In short, workers of Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd are primarily assigned to the production sections of cutting, sewing, and packing, which carries out different tasks

in the garment production process. The non-production maintenance section and the cleaning and security section perform essential support functions, while the administrative section coordinates factory operations and designates production plans while maintaining close communication with the factory owner. Due to the unique nature of the functions performed by the various sections of the factory, every section has slightly different staff demographics and communication dynamics. Nevertheless, they share the same characteristic of cross-cultural management. The managers are all Chinese people from China, the interpreters are all Chinese-Burmese, while the supervisors and frontline workers are all Burmese.

2. Cross-Cultural Work Communication

After describing the factory's divisions and production processes, this section provides an overview of the method of cross-cultural communication in this work environment. As this site comprised Chinese expatriate managers and Burmese workers, it experienced the typical difficulties with cross-cultural communication, including a high degree of effort required to reduce complexity, high transaction costs, and relatively low trust between people of different cultural background.[205] In view of this, the factory established some mechanisms to overcome the barriers and facilitate orderly, efficient, and productive work communication.

[205] Anthony Pym, 'Propositions on Cross-Cultural Communication and Translation' (2004) 16 Target. International Journal of Translation Studies 1.

2.1 Chinese-Burmese Interpreters

As soon as I arrived at the site, I learned that it is quite unlike the work environment of Western multinational corporations where the staff can usually communicate effectively in a lingua franca. Language barrier is a big problem for members of this factory. To the Chinese managers, not being able to express themselves in a familiar language made it much harder for them to manage the workplace, coordinate the production processes, and deliver instructions. To the Burmese workers, it was much harder to communicate their experiences and report problems faced in work to the Chinese managers.

Pasca and Wagner suggest that the need to overcome language barriers and master the language of the host country is likely to impose a great deal of stress on an individual and results in a heightened level of worry, anxiety, and suspicion.[206] It was true that language barrier was identified by many Burmese workers to be a source of fear and stress when they first started their position:

> 'The first time when I worked with the Chinese managers, I was a bit scared. 'It was because of the language problem, I was worried that I couldn't understand their language, and they couldn't understand what I'm saying.'[207]

[206] Romana Pasca and Shannon L Wagner, 'Occupational Stress, Mental Health and Satisfaction in the Canadian Multicultural Workplace' (2012) 109 Social Indicators Research 377.
[207] Interview 32, Burmese worker (senior supervisor).

From these words and my chats with the Burmese workers, I learnt that although most of them had never met a foreigner before working in this factory, they did not feel very intimidated and uncomfortable about the 'foreignness' of people from China or the idea of working with them under the same roof. Their fear is largely driven by a concern that due to language barrier, communicating with foreigners might be a daunting task. It seems clear that the issue of communication problem is more significant to the workers than the work itself.

As a means of overcoming the language barrier, the Hong Kong Chinese owners and Chinese managers had taken the initiative to find interpreters before the factory was established. A total of six interpreters were eventually hired, and they were assigned to different sections of the factory to facilitate communication between Chinese managers and Burmese workers. One of the most intriguing aspects of these interpreters is their ethnic and cultural background. In multinational corporations run by Westerners, it is common practice to hire a local of the host country who is fluent in a European language as interpreters. Certainly, this does not apply to this factory, whose managers are all Chinese and cannot speak a second language fluently. In this regard, Burmese people of Chinese ancestry, also referred to as Chinese-Burmese people, have been selected to act as interpreters.

As a group of ethnic Chinese people born and raised in Myanmar, the Chinese-Burmese people possess a unique bilingual and bicultural advantage, making them

perfect to serve not only as interpreters but also cultural intermediaries in the Chinese-run workplace. When I was conducting fieldwork at the site, I used Mandarin to communicate with the Chinese-Burmese interpreters. It was a surprise that their Mandarin was very fluent, almost like a native speaker. With their bilingual and characteristics, the Chinese-Burmese interpreters can gain a sense of closeness and trust from both Chinese managers and Burmese workers to serve as the 'bridge' for the two sides. Benefiting from their bilingual capacity, they can translate instantaneously and ensure important messages are delivered. Chinese managers usually seek help from interpreters when they need to deliver lengthy instructions to Burmese workers, and Burmese workers seek help when they need to report complicated and important issues to Chinese managers. Their presence in meetings is vital, as meetings usually last for more than an hour and involve a lot of complicated conversations related to production. When dealing with situations that may escalate into a conflict, their role is equally important, as they are able to communicate with different parties to understand the situation and seek a viable solution.

The interpreters may not be expert in production processes as they did not receive any training, but after being assigned to a section and working alongside the other workers for several years, they picked up a lot of technical skills and knowledge, which allows them to provide more accurate interpretation. As a result of their linguistic and cultural capabilities, as well as their familiarity with production issues, the interpreters became the factory's essential contributors. Burmese workers, for example, would rely on interpreters for clarification, explanation, and demonstration

of how certain tasks should be performed when receiving instructions from Chinese managers. When Chinese managers wanted to learn something, such as the Burmese word for some common garment production terms, they would ask interpreters to teach them so they could instruct workers directly if the interpreters were not available.

2.2 Covert and Indirect Methods

Having approximately one thousand Burmese workers and just six Chinese-Burmese interpreters at a factory made it virtually impossible for the interpreters to facilitate every communication between the Burmese workers and Chinese managers. Moreover, interpreters with limited work training may lack sufficient technical knowledge, resulting in an inability to translate technical terms accurately. In certain instances, it was necessary to conduct workplace interactions directly between the two sides.

In spite of my first impression that it is uncommon for Chinese managers and Burmese workers to communicate directly without the aid of interpreters, as I remained at the site for longer periods, it became evident that direct communication does occur, and such exchanges does not require complete sentences. Typically, Burmese workers, and in many cases their supervisors, express themselves to Chinese managers by using simple Burmese words mixed with some Mandarin. Likewise, Chinese managers often respond to workers mixing simple Chinese and Burmese words, although they

would also use the English word 'okay.' For example, using simple Burmese words like 'sa-yue' (manual) and 'tuu' (hammer), Chinese manager of the maintenance section could instruct the Burmese worker to hand him the tools while he was adjusting the sewing machine. At the sewing section, Chinese managers mixed words in their instructions, such as 'zhe ge' (this) in Mandarin followed by 'mei-ya-oo' (not allowed) in Burmese, and the workers understood the meaning and thereafter complied with the instructions.

With help of hand gestures and modern technology, sometimes the Chinese managers do not need to speak Burmese at all. For example, Chinese manager of the packing section, with very limited knowledge of the Burmese language, would nod or use the 'okay' gesture to signal approval. While delivering instructions, he would point at things, demonstrate in person, or use simple Chinese words combined with the English words 'okay' or 'no okay.' Since smart phones were becoming more common in Myanmar as of 2020, Chinese managers also used them to facilitate communication with workers. When they wanted workers to purchase something, they conveniently searched online for pictures instead of describing things. They used the translation function of messaging apps to convert Chinese words into Burmese for the workers to read.

Upon staying at the site for longer time, I realised that communication also take place in more covert forms. As I listened to stories and observed people working and interacting with each other, I learnt that Chinese managers and some Burmese

supervisors, after working together for several years, developed a kind of tacit yet solid mutual understanding at the workplace. The long-standing familiarity helped them transcend language barrier, and as described by a Chinese manager, the actual words used in verbal communication became less important to them:

> 'Burmese is really difficult to learn … after arriving here for so many years, we still couldn't learn it and remember the words. But we've communicated a lot, so we've gotten used to each other's communication, and we can understand each other.'[208]

What exactly is the basis for this covert form of communication? According to some Burmese workers, it is an 'intuition' about the needs of others in the workplace, developed through a long time of cooperation. A Chinese manager described this 'intuition' with the term '*moqi*', suggesting he and his staff relied on '*moqi*' to communicate with each other. '*Moqi*' is a construct in Chinese culture that reflects a state of unspoken or tacit understanding, with '*mo*' meaning 'without words,' and '*qi*' meaning 'consensus.'[209] For example, I noticed when the Chinese manager was looking for some papers, the Burmese worker already had an idea what he was looking for before he opened his mouth. Similarly, when the Chinese manger was adjusting a sewing machine, the Burmese workers already knew what tools would be

[208] Interview 53, Chinese manager.
[209] Xingshan Zheng and others, 'Unspoken yet Understood: An Introduction and Initial Framework of Subordinates' Moqi With Supervisors' (2019) 45 Journal of Management 955.

needed for the next procedure, so the Chinese manager only had to take a quick glance at his staff rather than giving verbal instructions.

A maintenance section Chinese manager admitted that the 'tacit agreement' of '*moqi*' is difficult to develop, and of all the Burmese workers in his team, only a few attained a high level of '*moqi*' to be promoted as supervisors. Yet those who successfully developed '*moqi*' are able to understand the needs and working style of Chinese managers, enabling more effective work communication. Some researchers identify China and Myanmar as cultures of 'high power distance,'[210] and it is suggested that this subordinate-oriented '*moqi*' is critical in such 'high power distance,' 'high-context,' and 'face-saving' cultures, of which communications rely heavily on implicit means, and there is a constant need for subordinates to gauge their superior's intentions to preserve face as much as possible.[211] It appears, however, that this intuition-based covert communication is mostly about subordinates meeting the work demands of their superiors, and like the general communication between Chinese managers and Burmese workers, it is highly task oriented. As I will discuss in the coming chapters, the Chinese managers tried to keep a distance from the Burmese staff and avoided developing personal and affective relationships with them.

In short, language barrier presents a serious problem for cross-cultural work environments, and potential negative consequences include ineffective

[210] Joel Brockner and others, 'Culture and Procedural Justice: The Influence of Power Distance on Reactions to Voice' (2001) 37 Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 300; Rudkin and Erba (n 21).
[211] Zheng and others (n 209).

communication, misunderstanding, and cohesion problem. Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd tackled this primarily by hiring Chinese-Burmese interpreters. Equipped with their bilingual and bicultural competence, the interpreters were in a suitable position to understand different concerns and bridge the communication divide between Chinese management and Burmese workers. While interpreters were essential in cross-cultural communication, in the process of establishing long-term work relations, the Chinese managers and Burmese supervisors also developed mutual understanding, which allowed them to work together using some intuition-based means of covert communication.

3. Management System and Structure

In a medium-sized factory like Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd, I realised it was not a rare sight that not a single Chinese manager was present on the shop floor, while nearly a thousand garment workers were busy operating the sewing machines on their own. On the second floor where the administrative section offices were located, there was an observation window installed with a view of the entire factory floor, yet I never saw anyone standing there to monitor the workers. In this section, I discuss the 'secret' of how the factory managed to supervise so many workers with completely different cultural background and made them work on their own: a cross-cultural hierarchical management system operating through a degree of localisation and delegation.

In essence, the cross-cultural hierarchical management system operates through the creation of a group of locally recruited Burmese supervisors, who were promoted from those Burmese frontline workers considered more experienced and competent by the Chinese management. In a three-tier hierarchical relationship, the Burmese frontline workers, at the bottom of the hierarchy, reported to the Burmese supervisors, who then reported to the Chinese managers located at the top, with the Chinese-Burmese interpreters acting as intermediaries. For the CMP sections, the supervisors were further divided into senior and junior supervisors. Through managing the Burmese supervisors, Chinese managers with their limited management capacity were able to lead hundreds of frontline workers while keeping production targets met and production quality satisfactory.

The Burmese supervisors were assigned by the Chinese management to perform many duties. A view expressed in management scholarship is that Chinese managers are open to delegating routine or mundane tasks to subordinates, but they tend to feel threatened by the idea of delegating authority.[212] Indeed, in this hierarchical management system, the Burmese supervisors were given some minor supervisory and decision-making tasks to handle. They took up the responsibility to train newcomers, as it was uncommon for the Chinese managers to teach frontline workers directly. They gathered their respective subordinate frontline workers every workday

[212] Barbara Xiaoyu Wang and Harold Chee, *Chinese Leadership* (Palgrave Macmillan 2011); Romie F Littrell, 'Influences on Employee Preferences for Empowerment Practices by the "Ideal Manager" in China' (2007) 31 International Journal of Intercultural Relations 87; IS Baird, MA Lyles and R Wharton, 'Attitudinal Differences between American and Chinese Managers Regarding Joint Venture Management' (1990) 30 MIR: Management International Review 53.

morning to give short briefings, during which they discussed work targets and evaluated performances. After the factory bell rang, they monitored the frontline workers closely and looked out for mistakes. They held meetings with Chinese managers to report the work progress in their respective sections. Vested with limited decision-making power, the Burmese supervisors could allow frontline workers feeling unwell to rest, and they could summon the workers for special meetings if issues arise. Whenever a technical or work-related problem occurred in the workplace which required immediate action, they could decide either to solve the problem themselves or refer it to the Chinese managers.

This management system appears to be a form of localisation, which is defined by Potter as the process when a local national fills a required job sufficiently competently to fulfil organisational needs.[213] Due to a variety of reasons, many multinational enterprises have adopted localisation as an international diversification strategy. Foreign enterprises in China practise 'localised localisation,' where expatriates are replaced by Chinese nationals with no overseas experience but have proven themselves and worked their way through the ranks.[214] Promotion from the ranks of the workforce is the long-term strategy of many multinationals, and is considered integral to the localisation of management. Even though some researchers of Korean companies in China suggest that this strategy runs against 'Chinese egalitarian cultural norms' in the workforce because traditionally Chinese workers were

[213] Christopher C Potter, 'Effective Localisation of the Workforce: Transferring Technology in Developing Countries' (1989) 13 Journal of European Industrial Training 25.
[214] Godfrey Yeung and Vincent Mok, 'WTO Accession and the Managerial Challenges for Manufacturing Sectors in China' (2002) 9 Asia Pacific Business Review 158.

promoted based on seniority not performance,[215] the Chinese managers in Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd seemed to believe in the idea of internal promotion. At times, they expressed to me how they hoped the Burmese supervisors could become more competent in the future, as eventually they would return to China, leaving the factory to be run by the Burmese supervisors.

Studies of Chinese multinationals in Africa suggest that although localisation differs according to the enterprise structures and the industrial sectors, primarily due to local pressure and their pricing strategy to keep labour costs cheap, Chinese enterprises are quite eager to localise their workforce, and they consider promoting local workers as a good management practice to reduce work inefficiencies and conflicts.[216] Studies of Chinese multinationals in Central Asia also suggest there are clear efforts by many major Chinese companies to localise their workforce and provide on-the-job training for staff. [217] However, localisation involves the delegation of decision-making authority to local employees, and some researchers argue that the amount of authority being delegated to local managers can serve as important indicator of the success of localisation.[218] There are studies suggesting that compared with American companies, Japanese companies' localisation process retains centralised control over decision-

[215] R Taylor, YD Cho and JH Hyun, 'Korean Companies in China: Strategies in the Localization of Management' (2001) 7 Asia Pacific Business Review 161.
[216] Antoine Kernen and Katy N Lam, 'Workforce Localization among Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) in Ghana' (2014) 23 Journal of Contemporary China 1053; Xiaoyang Tang, 'Bulldozer or Locomotive? The Impact of Chinese Enterprises on the Local Employment in Angola and the DRC' (2010) 45 Journal of Asian and African Studies 350.
[217] Dirk van der Kley, 'Chinese Companies' Localization in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan' (2020) 67 Problems of Post-Communism 241.
[218] Chi Sum Wong and Kenneth S Law, 'Managing Localization of Human Resources in the PRC: A Practical Model' (1999) 34 Journal of World Business 26; Kenneth S Law and others, 'The Antecedents and Consequences of Successful Localization' (2009) 40 Journal of International Business Studies 1359.

making process and there is less involvement of local managers,[219] but similar studies on Chinese enterprises are lacking. In her study of a Chinese-invested rubber factory in Thailand, Kosaikanont observed that there were no Thai nationals at the management level and absolute control of the company remains in the hands of the Chinese, so she was doubtful whether delegating and appointing Thai employees to higher positions would occur in the future.[220]

In the case of this factory, despite having incorporated certain practices of transferring responsibility to subordinates, the management system of Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd essentially pursued a top-down approach. Important decisions like output targets and production schedules were discussed only between Chinese managers in regular production meetings, without participation or contribution from the Burmese side. During my fieldwork, the factory was planning to expand production scale by making significant changes in the factory layout, but I noticed no Burmese supervisors had knowledge of this plan, let alone contributed to its development. Having been taught the technical know-how, they were only involved in decisions at a junior level concerning mundane and routine production activities, while the Chinese managers retained exclusive power to exercise higher level management such as planning, purchasing, prototypes revision, quality control, inspection, and coordination. Even

[219] Schon Beechler and others, 'Decision Making Localization And Decentralization In Japanese MNCs: Are There Costs Of Leaving Local Managers Out Of The Loop?' (1996); Joseph M Putti and Thomas Chong Thomas, 'American and Japanese Management Practices in Their Singapore Subsidiaries' (1985) 2 Asia Pacific Journal of Management 106.
[220] Kosaikanont (n 14).

for responsibilities within their role, if the problem is more complicated, the Burmese supervisors would readily rely on Chinese managers for solution:

> 'When there's a bigger problem, the Chinese manager is my superior, he can handle it, and because he has a lot more experience than me, he can find the source of the problem. So, I think it will take me a lot more time to solve the problem, but for him [the Chinese manager], he has lots of experience, it will take him less time.'[221]

This management system of localisation with centralised decision-making is somewhat based on certain assumptions and perceptions held by the management. The Chinese managers thought that the Burmese supervisors were 'too timid' to manage the workplace and lacked the ability to lead frontline workers effectively. A Chinese manager at the sewing section complained to me that the supervisors often 'felt hesitant' about criticising frontline workers, worrying that might result in breakdown of relationship. In her observation, the frontline workers sometimes refused to follow the instructions of supervisors. Like other Chinese managers, she continually instructed supervisors to be more proactive in exercising their authority, expecting them to 'courageously criticise' the errors of the frontline workers under their supervision:

[221] Interview 30, Burmese worker (senior supervisor).

> 'They think if they frequently criticise the workers, the workers will hate them. But I tell them, this is your right, your responsibility! As a manager, you need to do it. If you can't manage the place, why are you working as a supervisor? What are you supervising?'[222]

Besides 'timidness' and 'passivity,' the Chinese managers held other negative views towards their Burmese staff. They thought that the Burmese staff, when first recruited by the factory, were akin to 'blank sheets of paper' — lacking in any skills required, and that it was up to the Chinese managers to transfer technical knowledge and turn them into skilled labour. This resembles a talent development narrative among multinational enterprises that local talents are considered 'raw' and unusable and need to be developed to the standard required by the organisation, no matter how skilful they are.[223] While it is true that most Burmese staff had no experience working in a garment factory, and as described by a Chinese managers, they had not even seen a sewing machine before and had no idea how to use one, some Burmese workers might have acquired transferable skills through their experience working in cigarette, motorbike, or food-processing factories. Still, the Chinese managers generally perceive local Burmese as unskilled workers who must be trained from scratch.

The Chinese managers also had an impression that the Burmese workers were obedient but slow learners. As a Chinese manager described, 'Eighty percent of them

[222] Interview 46, Chinese manager.
[223] Nana Yaw Oppong and Jeff Gold, 'Developing Local Managers in the Ghanaian Mining Industry: An Indigenous Talent Model' (2016) 35 Journal of Management Development 341.

[the Burmese workers] are absolutely obedient. It's like teaching children, they're willing to learn,' but teaching the Burmese workers was considered hard work as they had to be taught by 'grabbing their hands,' necessitating longer training hours to become skilful and develop tacit understanding of work situations. Intriguingly, the Burmese workers were often contrasted with the workers in China, who were depicted as the exact opposite. Chinese workers were considered 'smart' but 'problematic to manage,' because allegedly they have already formed their own view from experience and are sometimes not so obedient to orders. This contrast between the obedient and the rebellious, the slow learners and the smart, the childlike and the independent-minded, appears to resemble orientalist tropes that presume the inferiority of the locals.[224] By standing still, listening attentively, and nodding in agreement with Chinese managers' instructions, the Burmese workers were automatically associated with obedience and incompetence.

Since the Burmese supervisors were seen as timid, passive, and dependent beings who would only 'turn west when instructed to turn west and turn east when instructed to turn east,' the Chinese managers retained much decision-making power and established a mechanism to monitor performance of the supervisors. White boards with designated output targets written down were placed at the front of every production line of the sewing section, and the supervisors responsible for those lines were required to update the board every hour to record the production output.

[224] Shatha Abu-Khafajah and Riham Miqdadi, 'Prejudice, Military Intelligence, and Neoliberalism: Examining the Local within Archaeology and Heritage Practices in Jordan' (2019) 4 Contemporary Levant 92; Tania Murray Li, 'The Price of Un/Freedom: Indonesia's Colonial and Contemporary Plantation Labor Regimes' (2017) 59 Comparative Studies in Society and History 245.

Although the piece-rate practice is banned by Myanmar state law, this white board system, as explained by the Chinese managers, served a function similar to the piece-rate system — motivating supervisors to compete with each other and improve productivity. As Burawoy have noted, such 'workplace games' quantifying production targets are effective shop floor control mechanisms to stimulate hard work and compels the supervisors to exercise a certain degree of autonomy to minimise disruptions in the production process.[225]

As it was clear from the discussion above, the Chinese managers delegated power to create a group of local supervisors out of the Burmese workers, forming a three-tier workplace hierarchy system to facilitate task-management and communication activities. While it might appear that the Chinese managers were preparing workforce localisation, the Burmese supervisors, perceived as obedient and timid, were not given the autonomy to exercise creative discretion and develop a strong capacity. Delegation of authority was mostly restricted to the mundane aspects of production, overlooking the creation of conditions for heightened motivation and enhanced self-efficacy, such as increasing workplace democracy, openly sharing information and responsibility for goals and performance, and involving staff directly in decision-making, which are considered important strategies for empowerment in Western context.[226]

[225] Michael Burawoy and Janos Lukacs, 'Mythologies of Work: A Comparison of Firms in State Socialism and Advanced Capitalism' (1985) 50 American Sociological Review 723.
[226] Thomas A Potterfield, *The Business of Employee Empowerment: Democracy and Ideology in the Workplace* (Greenwood Publishing Group 1999); Jay A Conger and Rabindra N Kanungo, 'The Empowerment Process: Integrating Theory and Practice' (1988) 13 Academy of Management Review 471.

It is suggested that both China and Myanmar are 'high power distance' cultures,[227] and in such cultures which inequality across status hierarchies is taken as the norm,[228] it is believed that empowerment may not be appropriate, since people are socialised to work under autocratic leadership where task guidelines are provided from above.[229] Is that the case in Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd? This factory comprising of people from two allegedly 'high power distance' cultures does seem to reflect an organisational culture of 'high power distance.' Not only was the degree of localisation and delegation limited, but also, there was an emphasis on status differences and leader-follower distance. For example, the Burmese workers had lunch in the outdoor dining area, the Chinese managers had lunch indoors at the factory accommodation, and the Chinese-Burmese interpreters also had lunch at the factory accommodation but always at a separate table in a different room. This organisational arrangement, combined with a system of centralised power, skews power relations heavily in favour of the Chinese expatriate managers, and it shares some curious similarities with the social segregation and racial division of labour practices prevalent in colonial regimes.[230]

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[227] Rudkin and Erba (n 21); Spencer-Oatey (n 29).
[228] William B Gudykunst and Stella Ting-Toomey, 'Culture and Affective Communication' (1988) 31 American Behavioural Scientist 384.
[229] Dafna Eylon and Kevin Y Au, 'Exploring Empowerment Cross-Cultural Differences Along The Power Distance Dimension' (1999) 23 International Journal of Intercultural Relations 373; Scott E Seibert, Seth R Silver and W Alan Randolph, 'Taking Empowerment to the next Level: A Multiple-Level Model of Empowerment, Performance, and Satisfaction' (2004) 47 Academy of Management Journal 332.
[230] Karen Brodkin, 'Global Capitalism: What's Race Got to Do with It?' (2000) 27 American Ethnologist 237; Filomeno V. Aguilar, 'Global Migrations, Old Forms of Labor, and New Transborder Class Relations' (2003) 41 Southeast Asian Studies 137.

4. Grievance Management Strategies and Mechanisms

In Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd, there are some strategies and mechanisms used by the factory members to address grievances and resolve disputes. During my fieldwork, I was told by the Chinese managers that the factory had never experienced any significant labour disputes. Yet, no matter how conflict-free the workplace may appear to be, conflicts are an inevitable phenomenon in management-labour relations. With examination of the work environment, I realised that most grievances in this factory were unexpressed, and for those that were expressed, they were suppressed by the factory in different ways such that few were brought to be handled via formal grievance management mechanisms. Although Asians are generally stereotyped as preferring conflict avoiding behaviours, I suggest that in the factory of Chinese-Burmese encounter, there are different strategies and mechanisms for addressing grievances. Some are seemingly characterised by inaction and passivity, some are more informal and casual, and some are formal and institutionalised procedures.

In this section, I describe the various strategies and mechanisms of grievance management with reference to their 'degree of mobilisation' — the extent to which they are confrontational, formal, and institutionalised procedures. I begin with the strategies with the lowest degree of mobilisation, which were the most used in the factory, then moving along the spectrum of legal mobilisation from lowest to highest, I discuss the other mechanisms of higher degree of mobilisation which were rarely used in the factory.

4.1 Non-Institutional Mechanisms

4.1.1 Tolerance

Toleration is the endurance and inaction by an aggrieved party against an offender.[231] Amongst the grievance management strategies that I have observed in Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd, toleration is the most passive means, and strictly speaking not a form of grievance management, but it was most frequently used by the Burmese workers, since grievance feelings formed a core part of their work lives and it was difficult for them to always take measures to express such feelings. Black suggests that when handling volatile situations, people often use 'unilateral peaceableness' to continuously 'lumping it,' 'turning the other cheek,' or 'biting the bullet,' and toleration is possibly the most common response of aggrieved people.[232]

The Burmese workers engaged in toleration because of a variety of reasons. Most of them tried to perceive their toleration in a positive light. Describing the experience of stressful situations as part of their job responsibility, they suggested it was 'appropriate' for them to admit their shortcomings, accept punishment for not meeting the management's expectations, and cope with the more unpleasant aspects of their work. This tolerance, however, appears more likely to be driven by fear. The

[231] Calvin Morrill and Cheryl King Thomas, 'Organizational Conflict Management as Disputing Process The Problem of Social Escalation' (1992) 18 Human Communication Research 400.
[232] Donald Black, 'The Elementary Forms of Conflict Management', *New Directions in the Study of Justice, Law, and Social Control* (Spring Science+Business Media, LLC 1990).

Burmese workers feared the Chinese managers' authority and the potential consequences of confronting their superiors, which could be deprivation of work opportunities and assignment of extra work. Facing the risk of retribution and getting marked as 'troublemakers,' the Burmese workers were rather hesitant when it came to voicing their concerns to the Chinese management.

Some scholars may describe the act of succumbing to the demands of more powerful actor for preserving existing relationship as 'submission.'[233] While there is a degree of truth to this, given that workplace relations in the factory were highly asymmetric, there were other factors contributing to this fear-based tolerance. The Burmese workers, usually frontline staff, feared peer group pressure if they stood up and spoke openly about the factory's problems. Htay Way Way, a frontline worker at the cutting section, said he was dissatisfied with the salary and work environment. Yet, he insisted that he would not bring such issues to the attention of the management, because allegedly this was 'not a personal issue' to him, and he was afraid he would be the 'odd one out' complaining, while the other workers remained silent.

The Burmese workers' feelings of fear, anxiety, and embarrassment shown towards peer group pressure can be analysed with the lens of *'anade*,' a Burmese social convention identified and named by Bekker.[234] *'Anade'* refers to the Burmese social convention of exercising restraint on self-assertiveness to save face and preserve

[233] Wesley S Helms and Christine Oliver, 'Radical Settlements to Conflict: Conflict Management and Its Implications for Institutional Change' (2015) 21 Journal of Management and Organization 471.
[234] Sarah M Bekker, 'The Concept of Anade: Personal, Social and Political Implication', *Contribution to Asian Studies: Essays on Burma* (EJ Brill-Leiden 1981).

group harmony. An analogy can be drawn between '*anade*' and the social convention in 'high-context' cultures in which people control their feelings and communicate carefully to anticipate reactions from others. Scholars had long recognised the significant implications of '*anade*' on many aspects of Burmese society,[235] and because of the influence of '*anade*', there is a tendency and a pressure of the Burmese people to conform to group opinion. Such a sentiment was expressed by Win Zin Phyu, a frontline staff working at the storage area:

> 'It's not about me, it's about all the workers. If all the workers decide to tolerate this, then I'll tolerate, but if they don't, then I don't.'[236]

Thu Nyein Aye, another frontline worker, explained a similar sentiment, but with more elaboration and details:

> 'I thought of complaining [about the annual leave policy], but everyone remained silent, so why shouldn't I remain silent? If I try to complain, a lot of people will get jealous. … Because very few people are complaining. The other workers will think, "Oh, this guy keep on standing up and complaining like that, look, everyone is staying quiet

[235] See for example, Tomas Cole, '"Power-Hurt": The Pains of Kindness among Disabled Karen Refugees in Thailand' (2020) 85 Ethnos 224; Matthew Joseph Walton, 'Politics in the Moral Universe: Burmese Buddhist Political Thought' (University of Washington 2012); John P Ferguson, *Contribution to Asian Studies: Essays on Burma* (EJ Brill 1981); Charles Carstens, 'Gift Narration: Dynamic Themes of Reciprocity, Debt, and Social Relations in Theravāda Buddhist Myanmar' (2020) 35 Journal of Contemporary Religion 31.

[236] Interview 31, Burmese worker (frontline).

> because they like the rules, there're only a few people who don't like the rules."'[237]

By inhibiting the intention to speak out, whether to state a preference or to make a criticism, so as not to impose nuisance or inconvenience to others, the feelings of *'anade'* drove the workers to show deference and observe the proprieties of behaviour as defined by their situation and status.[238] For example, overtime work might be stated by the management as entirely 'voluntary,' but as most if not all workers seemed to stay quiet and accept the arrangement unquestionably, this generated immense peer group pressure on those who had a different view. Standing out from the crowd as the 'outspoken few' entailed a high risk of being seen as disrupting group harmony. So to avoid conflicts, it became natural for the Burmese workers, like the sewing section frontline worker, Mor Su Myat, to display tolerance and somewhat unwillingly comply with management instructions:

> 'I am stressed and tired, but the only thing in my mind, I don't want to start an argument. So, I choose the better way and just do what they [the Chinese managers] want me to do.'[239]

Emphasising the preservation of group harmony and steering away from direct confrontations, *'anade'* bears some similarities to the prototype of 'face culture,' which

[237] Interview 16, Burmese worker (frontline).
[238] Bekker (n 234).
[239] Interview 11, Burmese worker (frontline).

is theorised as the logic of 'collectivistic' Asian societies.[240] The Burmese workers in this factory were inclined to portray themselves as having a positive relationship despite having harboured negative feelings. They had a high concern with the norms of the group, as they frequently tolerated grievances to uphold such perceived group harmony. Intriguingly, this appears to be in contrast with workers in African cultures. Jackson have suggested that although African cultures tend to be group focused, people's behaviour patterns do not involve group harmony, conflict avoidance, and subjugation to the group, as much as people in Asian cultures.[241] It is argued that African workers would like to have the opportunity to express their grievances and find a 'listening ear from senior management,' and the failure to honour such through face-to-face communication may cause grievances to escalate into industrial actions.[242]

4.1.2 Avoidance

Conflict avoidance is the activity to smooth over conflicts and to minimise direct confrontation with the other party.[243] Although tolerance is arguably also a form of avoidance, in this context, 'avoidance' refers to the more active form of taking action

[240] See the discussion on 'face culture' in Quan Hoang Nguyen Tran, 'A Pilot Study on Measuring Organisational Culture in Vietnamese Corporations in Light of Task and Relationship Orientations' (2019) 3 International Journal of Export Marketing 20; Mendiola Teng-Calleja, Marshaley J Baquiano and Cristina J Montiel, 'From "Good Day" to "Sign Here": Norms Shaping Negotiations Within a Face Culture' (2015) 8 Negotiation and Conflict Management Research 228; Soroush Aslani and others, 'Dignity, Face, and Honor Cultures: Implications for Negotiation and Conflict Management', *Handbook of Research on Negotiation* (Edward Elgar 2013); SH Schwartz, 'Beyond Individualism/Collectivism: New Cultural Dimensions of Values.' in Uichol Kim and others (eds), *Individualism and Collectivism: Theory, Method, and Applications* (Sage Publications 1994).

[241] Terence Jackson, 'Managing Change in South Africa: Developing People and Organizations' (1999) 10 International Journal of Human Resource Management 306.

[242] Mzamo P Mangaliso and others, 'Invoking Ubuntu Philosophy as a Source of Harmonious Organizational Management' (Academy of Management Annual Meeting Proceedings, Chicago, 2018).

[243] Ann Chunyan Peng and Dean Tjosvold, 'Social Face Concerns and Conflict Avoidance of Chinese Employees with Their Western or Chinese Managers' (2011) 64 Human Relations 1031.

to avoid certain person or things, rather than a passive tolerance typified by inaction. As a common tactic employed by the Burmese staff, avoidance could take many forms. When they were upset with someone, they would turn themselves away from that person and avoid coming face to face with him or her. Aung Tung Han, a frontline worker at the cutting section, used this approach whenever he felt wronged by someone:

> 'If I come to realise that somebody is not treating me well, I tell myself, "He is a bad guy," then I stay away from that person.'[244]

Guerrero, Farinelli, and McEwan note that behaviour indirectly communicating negative affect in a destructive manner, such as ignoring or avoiding someone, can be a passive aggressive form of anger expression.[245] In this manner, active avoidance can be understood as a means of expressing grievance feelings, a form of silent protest, by the Burmese workers. For example, San Myint Myint, a sewing section junior supervisor, once got angry with a male Chinese manager at the packing section, since she thought the manager was ogling the female workers 'as if he wanted to rape them,' and she heard a rumour that the manager had casual relationships with them. Indicating to me she was afraid of the consequences, San Myint Myint did not openly express her unhappy sentiment, share her thoughts with anyone, or talk to the girls who she thought were subject to sexual harassment. What she did in protest was to

[244] Interview 25, Burmese worker (frontline).
[245] Laura K Guerrero, Lisa Farinelli and Bree McEwan, 'Attachment and Relational Satisfaction: The Mediating Effect of Emotional Communication' (2009) 76 Communication Monographs 487.

avoid that manager whenever she caught a glimpse of him, or whenever she had to go near the packing section.

Although the Burmese workers' passive aggressive behaviour was intended to avoid direct and open expression of anger, the Chinese managers suggested that after working with their Burmese staff for a long time, it was not difficult at all to sense that some workers had developed ill feelings and had been deliberately avoiding them. As a packing section Chinese manager described his 'intuition' about the feelings of his Burmese staff:

> 'It's pretty easy to know when the Burmese people are distressed. I sometimes chat with a few my close 'henchman' (frontline supervisors) after work. If suddenly they refuse to chat with you and just leave the workplace right after work, you know you've said something bad to them and they were unhappy about it.'

The passive aggressive behaviour of Burmese staff, therefore, was more like a form of covert communication that served to deliver a message indirectly to the Chinese managers. When there was sufficient tacit understanding developed between the two sides, it became possible for them to recognise that problem existed without engaging in direct confrontations.

4.1.3 Persuasion, Discussion, and Negotiation

As I have described, the Burmese workers were generally reserved about expressing their frustration. However, some of the Burmese workers, in most cases supervisors, were more willing to voice their complaints to the management. They indicated that if necessary, they would be prepared to discuss with Chinese managers about issues such as salary, work condition, and overtime work. For example, Kyaw Thi Thi, a senior supervisor, was assigned a task to produce garments, and although she knew two frontline staff would be necessary to complete the task on time, the Chinese manager thought one worker would be enough. Feeling frustrated, she raised her concern to the Chinese manager with the help of interpreter, and they had a face-to-face discussion of the issue. Another option of the Burmese workers was to discuss their grievance with the staff at the administrative section. Win Yin Nu, a junior supervisor of the packing section, did not like the sanitary condition of the bathrooms, so she spoke to the administrative section and requested for new soaps and thorough cleaning, of which the management later agreed.

For the Chinese managers, lengthy interactions with the Burmese staff were usually used as opportunities to address grievances and modify any workplace behaviour deemed undesirable. Described by a Chinese manager as 'thought work' ('*sixiang gongzuo*'), the term referring to a kind of state-led ideological indoctrination through personal exchange that was used extensively during China's Maoist era, such 'discussions' were literally about working on thoughts — attempting to make the aggrieved workers feel better, convince them to 'think for the collective good,' and persuade them to put themselves in the shoes of the factory. Compared with punitive

actions, 'thought work' was considered by the Chinese managers to be the 'better' option, since it was believed that the workers would be 'persuaded' by such effort and perceive management decisions as reasonable and acceptable.

'Thought work' is a popular practice in China. After the communists took power in 1949, governmental agencies dealing with labour dispute were abolished, and for a few decades, such disputes were 'resolved' primarily through 'transforming' workers' participatory consciousness with 'thought work.'[246] Since the economic reforms in the 1970s, the Chinese state gradually resumed an institutional role in labour dispute resolution, but this Maoist tradition of 'thought work' has continued.[247] For example, Lu Zhang's study of China's automobile factories has found that management actively utilised socialist organisational legacies, such as promoting enterprise paternalism and mediating shop-floor conflicts through 'thought work,' to advance its legitimacy and control , and Lu Zhang argues such strategies were effective in eliciting workers' cooperation while defusing labour-management conflict.[248]

Since the Chinese managers held significant power in the factory, they could easily change the emphasis of their discussions with Burmese staff and bring in elements of 'thought work.' Although mundane, there are many other minor but vivid examples of 'thought work' techniques being used in this factory. Some workers who smoked

[246] Wenjia Zhuang and Feng Chen, '"Mediate First": The Revival of Mediation in Labour Dispute Resolution in China' (2015) 222 China Quarterly 380.
[247] Lisa Rofel, 'Rethinking Modernity: Space and Factory Discipline in China' (1992) 7 Cultural Anthropology 93.
[248] Lu Zhang, *Inside China's Automobile Factories: The Politics of Labor and Worker Resistance* (Cambridge University Press 2014).

in the warehouse were disciplined for breaking the rules, so they wanted the management to set up a smoking area for them. Some other workers were disciplined for chewing betel nuts and were unhappy about the ban. Facing these complaints, the management conducted 'thought work' on the aggrieved workers. According to the Chinese managers, 'thought work' was meant to be 'heart-to-heart' ('*jiangxin bixin'*), to empathise with the workers and care about their own good, so their strategy in these examples was to persuade workers that smoking and chewing betel nuts are bad for their health, and quitting these 'bad habits' would let them save money for more important things.

'Thought work' may appear to advocate for a people-centred management style and an understanding of workers' needs. Yet, with highly centralised decision-making, it was rare for the factory management to accept workers' input or accede to their request. Even minor requests, like the request to work during afternoon break in exchange for leaving work earlier at a particular day, were rejected. Regarding any suggestions that involve significant change to existing factory policies, the factory was very reluctant to make concessions.

'Thought work' is not about 'heart-to-heart' empathy towards workers or trying to reach a consensus. Quite the contrary, through persuading workers to forsake their demands for policy change, it was conducted to protect management interest. As observed by China Studies scholars O'Brien and Deng, 'thought work' represents a soft form of coercion to give people an illusory sense of inclusion in decision making

and limited rights to expression and supervision, on the condition that the order is ultimately complied with.[249] Stressing that workers should 'see from the factory's side,' 'thought work' in this factory was aimed at reinforcing the notion that workers' personal interests are aligned with the factory's, and that their concern for self-interest should be subordinated to organisational goals. Therefore, the Chinese managers would also attempt to appeal to workers' sense of collective self-esteem, to persuade them that their worth is not connected to their personal competence, but more so to their contribution to the collective:

> 'I want you to learn more, if you do things in a well-organised manner, others will think you're a responsible worker. My principle is this, in the future if you leave this factory and work in some other places, if your future manager praises you and says, "This worker does the job well!" I will have "face" for this, and you will have "face" too. Of course, you also get higher salary for your skills! That's what I want. If there's an apprentice, my name is mentioned, and people say that this apprentice is excellent, then I feel happy.'[250]

This legacy narrative of workers giving face to their managers through receiving recognition from others clearly reflects characteristics of the 'face culture' prototype — personal worth is assessed according to external evaluations, and 'success' must be

[249] Kevin J O'Brien and Yanhua Deng, 'Preventing Protest One Person at a Time: Psychological Coercion and Relational Repression in China' (2017) 17 China Review 179.
[250] Interview 40, Chinese manager.

seen through other people's eyes in order to count.[251] By having the focus of discussion shifted to their 'apprentice' position and the perceived manager-worker bond, the Burmese workers were expected to accept the idea that they owed their potential success to their 'mentors,' and any concerns of self-interest should give way to the 'higher' goal of honouring their 'mentors' with dedication and hard work.

While this subsection discusses primarily the 'persuasion' techniques used by Chinese managers, other members of the factory, specifically the Chinese-Burmese interpreters and Burmese supervisors, also engaged in some similar practices. This will be discussed in detail in the coming chapters.

4.2 Institutional Mechanisms

4.2.1 Disciplinary Measures

When grievances emerged as a result of workers not meeting performance expectations or deviating from the rules, disciplinary measures might be taken in accordance with the rules to modify workers' behaviour and suppress their grievances. Similar to other garment factories, the rules in this factory stipulated worker rights such as overtime pay, leave entitlement, and workplace safety. They also stated the lunch and break hours, the demand for approval before absenting, and the prohibition

[251] Chi Ying Cheng and others, 'When Do Subordinates Commit to Their Supervisors? Different Effects of Perceived Supervisor Integrity and Support on Chinese and American Employees' (2015) 26 Leadership Quarterly 81; Young Hoon Kim and Dov Cohen, 'Information, Perspective, and Judgments about the Self in Face and Dignity Cultures' (2010) 36 Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 537.

of eating and usage of mobile phones during work hours. The rules therefore served as a coercive strategy to control workers, silence their complaints, and minimise disruption to operation. They were typed up in both Burmese and Chinese, printed out, and stuck to the notice boards on the shop floors to be made public.

Apart from rules, I noticed there were also policies made by individual Chinese managers setting out the work procedures to be followed by workers under their supervision. While the Burmese supervisors were the enforcers of existing rules and policies, the Chinese managers might impose new restrictions when conflicts emerged over a certain expectation discrepancy in the production process. With a liking for systematic style of management, the Chinese managers might make directive adjustments to effect changes to work arrangements. For example, the Chinese manager at the sewing section implemented a labelling procedure to identify workers who produced 'substandard' garments. Such policies were typically unwritten and merely known among workers as the norm, probably reinforced through '*moqi*' with the Chinese managers.

A common stereotype holds that Chinese managers emphasise Confucian business practices and are benign in how they manage their employees; however, research of ethnic Chinese-run factories in China have unveiled how workers were subjected to very coercive and militaristic work discipline, and that corporal punishment, discipline vis-à-vis bodily functions, and monetary penalties were common.[252] In this

[252] Anita Chan and Xiaoyang Zhu, 'Disciplinary Labor Regimes in Chinese Factories' (2003) 35 Critical Asian Studies 559; Siu (n 47); Chak Kwan Chan and Zhaiwen Peng, 'From Iron Rice Bowl to the World's

factory, while there was no such extreme disciplinary measures to drive workers into silence and submission, reprimand was the most common disciplinary action to address deviation from rules or failure to meet work-related expectations. Oral warning might be given, and if the issue at hand was considered a 'repeated offence' or of more serious nature, written warning notice might be used. For example, some workers from the sewing section were given oral warning for absenting from work without notifying the management, and a receive and dispatch officer was given a written warning notice for repeatedly failing to count and record the quantity of products to the satisfaction of Chinese managers.

The Chinese managers might dismiss a worker, though it was very rare. During my stay at the factory, there was only one example of such, which two male frontline workers were dismissed for drunk fighting near the factory entrance. The Chinese managers could also enforce disciplinary measures to suppress any arguments in relation to work arrangement. For example, they could assign 'problematic' frontline workers who were frequent complainers to another work position, and during the factory's busier months, they could deprive workers of the opportunity to work overtime and earn overtime pay.

Whereas some organisations allow for appeal against disciplinary actions to higher-level managers or neutral decision makers,[253] in this factory with highly centralised

Biggest Sweatshop: Globalization, Institutional Constraints, and the Rights of Chinese Workers' (2011) 85 Social Service Review 421.

[253] Brian S Klaas and Gregory G Dell'omo, 'Managerial Use of Dismissal: Organizational-Level Determinants' (1997) 50 Personnel Psychology 927.

decision-making process, there was no mechanism for the workers to challenge management decisions. Such decisions could hardly be reviewed, since apart from warning notices, no written record was kept for major disciplinary decisions including reassignment of position and deprivation of overtime work opportunities.

4.2.2 Suggestion Boxes

At various locations of the factory, there were a few suggestion boxes set up by the management for workers to use. These boxes were small, red in colour, and had the Burmese words 'suggestion box' printed on them. Workers could write down their suggestions and complaints on a piece of paper and put it into the box. The box was considered by Chinese management to be a formal and anonymised channel for workers to express their views and submit grievances.

In practice, the suggestion boxes were seldom used. Dust-covered locks were pretty much the evidence that those boxes were infrequently opened. Since upon starting their position, the workers did not receive any training regarding the mechanisms for submitting grievances, many of them were unaware of the boxes or were unconvinced of their significance. Myint Man, a sewing section junior supervisor, recalled how she was once informed of the location of the boxes, and frontline workers were given pieces of paper to write down and submit their suggestions. She herself though, along with many workers, had never used the boxes. Another sewing section senior supervisor, Kyaw Mon Ei, even said that she had no idea where the boxes were located.

Investigation of factories in China have unveiled that although such suggestion boxes for receiving complaints are a common practice, workers seldom make use of them because they believe that the management would not address the issues raised.[254] Similarly, in this factory, the workers were doubtful about the usefulness of the boxes. 'When I think about it, whether the case will be solved or not, nobody knows,' commented Hyay Than Than, a sewing section frontline worker. The Chinese factory general manager revealed that with nearly a thousand workers in the factory, over the years there were only five suggestion letters submitted to the boxes, and all of them were minor complaints about factory facilities such as the water fountain. Though the Chinese manager emphasised that the factory did respond positively, the tiny number of suggestion letters indicates that the suggestion boxes did not play the expected role as a communication tool between the management and the workers.

4.2.3 Workplace Coordinating Committee (WCC)

In this factory, the WCC was the most important formal mechanism for addressing worker grievances. Worker representatives were chosen by the Burmese workers through a voting system, and the management representatives were the Hong Kong owner and several Chinese managers. The SLDL only mandated two worker representatives in WCCs, but there were altogether ten worker representatives in the WCC of this factory, two of them calling themselves the 'leaders of the representatives.' WCC meetings were held regularly for worker representatives and management

[254] China Labor Watch, 'The Kingmaker Company's Factory in Zhuhai , China: Stolen Wages, Unfair Labor Practices' (2005); Ingeborg Wick, 'Labour and Women's Rights in the Discount Business: Aldi's Special Bargains from China' (2009).

representatives to discuss various issues, and typically the meetings included interpreters from the administrative section as well. When some workers felt aggrieved, after reaching a consensus about a problem they wanted to address, they could orally submit a complaint to the worker representatives, who would then discuss the issue with the other representatives and reflect the issue to administrative section. If both worker representatives and management representatives agree, special meetings would be convened to discuss the issue.

Despite the significance of WCC, some workers were not aware of the existence of WCC and the identity of worker representatives, probably because the factory had not provided any briefing sessions to them. Unlike the supervisors who were given name tags to wear and had their names and photos displayed in public, there was no such display of the identity and information of worker representatives, and nothing about the WCC was mentioned at all on the factory's notice boards.

According to the SLDL, WCC is designed to resemble collective bargaining organisations. Workers can come together as a group and elect representatives to negotiate with management over terms of employment conditions, occupational safety, health, and productivity.[255] Similar arrangements are seen in other countries, for example in Myanmar's neighbouring countries like Vietnam, Bangladesh, and China, there are requirements for the election of worker representatives and holding

[255] Fair Wear Foundation, 'Workplace Social Dialogue in Myanmar: Experiences and Lessons Learned' (2019) <https://api.fairwear.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Myanmar-Social-Dialogue-Report-WEB-DEF-A5.pdf> accessed 21 July 2021; Rafael Gely, 'Collective Bargaining and Dispute System Design' (2017) 13 University of St. Thomas Law Journal 218.

of management-worker meetings to discuss strategic policies and other welfare issues as requested by worker representatives.[256] In China's factories though, given the authoritarian regime and a culture of state-controlled unionism, worker representatives are typically communist party affiliated officials or shop floor supervisors, and they serve as an extended management function to detect signs of grievance and provide counselling to 'troubled' workers, rather than play an industrial democracy role.[257]

A study of factories in Myanmar suggests that those with WCC are less likely to experience a dispute that is unsolved, and that worker representatives can improve industrial relations and provide better working environment for the workers.[258] During my stay at the factory, I read the WCC meeting minutes and attended WCC meetings. Only two special meetings were convened spanning a period of six months, indicating that the worker representatives were not very enthusiastic about collecting and voicing workers' concerns. In the meetings, I observed that although the worker representatives did raise a few suggestions on behalf of the workers, such were mostly met with disagreement from the management representatives, who would then

[256] Mark Anner, 'Worker Resistance in Global Supply Chains: Wildcat Strikes, International Accords and Transnational Campaigns' (2015) 7 International Journal of Labour Research 17; Zhu Xiaoyang and Anita Chan, 'Staff and Workers' Representative Congress: An Institutionalized Channel for Expression of Employees' Interests?' (2005) 37 Chinese Sociology and Anthropology 6; Jimmy Donaghey and Juliane Reinecke, 'When Industrial Democracy Meets Corporate Social Responsibility — A Comparison of the Bangladesh Accord and Alliance as Responses to the Rana Plaza Disaster' (2018) 56 British Journal of Industrial Relations 14.
[257] Pun Ngai, 'Global Production, Company Codes of Conduct, and Labor Conditions in China: A Case Study of Two Factories' (2005) 54 China Journal 101; Fang Lee Cooke, 'Chinese Industrial Relations Research: In Search of a Broader Analytical Framework and Representation' (2014) 31 Asia Pacific Journal of Management 875.
[258] Lin and others (n 179).

attempt to 'persuade' the worker representatives to stand in the factory' shoes and change their mind.

Whereas in effective worker participation, worker representatives can exert pressure on the management to consider workers' suggestions, share information with workers, and protect labour rights,[259] the dynamics of the WCC meetings indicate that the worker representatives did not hold much power to influence factory decisions, and they were unable to mobilise shop floor support to help them press for changes. As the agenda was defined by management representatives, WCC meetings often became a simple discussion of problems at the shop floors. The dynamics of WCC will be discussed in more detail in the coming chapters.

4.2.4 Labour Ministry and other External Parties

The Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population is Myanmar's government department responsible for enforcing labour laws, enhancing worker welfare, and settling industrial disputes. Workers can launch complaints to this ministry alleging violation of their rights under the law. The invocation of such formalised complaint procedures and involvement of official state institutions, by its nature, requires workers to possess sufficient awareness, knowledge, and understanding of the relevant state laws and policies.

[259] David I Levine, 'Public Policy Implications of Imperfections in the Market for Worker Participation' (1992) 13 Economic and Industrial Democracy 183.

To launch a formal complaint, workers need to submit their case to the Township Labour Office, established in every township of Myanmar, and an officer from the Labour Ministry will receive and review the complaints.[260] The complaining workers will have to consider several difficult complications, for example, complaints related to dismissal must be submitted to a 'labour officer,' while complaints related to overtime must be submitted to a 'labour inspector,' which are absent in some townships. [261] There are also statutory limitation periods for certain types of complaints, like a complaint about salary must be filed within six months of the date of receiving the disputed salary.[262]

In addition to launching complaints to the labour ministry, available institutional procedures for conflict management include mediation, arbitration, and legal proceedings, and the workers in Myanmar may also seek help from external parties like journalists, NGOs, and lawyers specialised in the settlement of industrial disputes.[263] They are most active in Yangon, where most factories are located, but their presence is very limited in smaller cities like Pakokku.

It was, however, very rare for the members of this factory to use such institutionalised mechanisms to address grievances and resolve disputes. Chinese managers considered it undesirable for workers to bypass the built-in grievance mechanisms

[260] International Labour Organization, 'Myanmar Labour Law: FAQs for Workers' (2018).
[261] ibid.
[262] ibid.
[263] For example, 'Action Labour Rights' is a Burmese labour rights NGO committed to provide support for factory workers in collective bargaining and dispute cases.

and invite external parties to intervene. The Burmese workers, with a tendency to avoid direct confrontation with factory management, generally refrained from seeking external help. Many of the Burmese staff, even some supervisors, admitted they had little knowledge of the state law, and they had never thought of engaging the law and the state institutions in reaction to perceived wrongdoing. According to Mr. Chun, the general manager of the factory, over the years there was only one Burmese worker who reported his case to the labour ministry, after prolonged discussion with the management over issues related to holiday leave and work environment. That worker eventually failed in his claim, as he received a decision from the ministry that he was not entitled to the things he was asking for.

Interestingly, the anonymity provided by the reporting channels appears to be a relevant factor in the workers' consideration of using institutional grievance mechanisms. Reflecting on an incident involving a frontline worker who launched a complaint to the labour ministry by phone alleging excessive overtime work, Mr. Chun said:

> 'A few of them [the Burmese workers] do speak out, but usually they don't, because they're worried about retribution. I think that's why he made a telephone call, since no one would know who actually made it [the complaint].'[264]

[264] Interview 26, Chinese manager.

By suggesting that the workers were reluctant to voice their concerns out of fear of retribution, Mr. Chun acknowledged that the risk of retribution was real and highlighted how institutional mechanisms involving external parties could provide security to complainants raising 'sensitive' labour rights issues. If a Burmese worker exhausted the options of suggestions boxes and WCC, rather than pointing out the faults to the management, launching a complaint to the labour ministry might allow the worker to remain anonymous and limit the number of people who would hear the complaint, thus giving the worker a stronger sense of safety.[265]

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I discuss that given its nature as a Chinese-run enterprise employing Burmese workers, this factory represents a specific context of power arrangement in a cross-cultural organisational work environment, of which the positions held by its members are closely related to their social categories. Chinese staff were the leaders making strategic decisions and overseeing the entire section. Burmese staff were either the frontline workers performing mundane tasks or the supervisors responsible for monitoring frontline workers. Communication across cultural and linguistic boundaries chiefly took place with the help of interpreters who were all Chinese-Burmese, though there was some direct communication using simple language and covert communication based on mutual understanding. While the Chinese

[265] Chang M Mao and David C DeAndrea, 'How Anonymity and Visibility Affordances Influence Employees' Decisions About Voicing Workplace Concerns' (2019) 33 Management Communication Quarterly 160.

management implemented a certain degree of workforce localisation by creating a class of Burmese supervisors, in view of the centralised and hierarchical character of the workplace, these supervisors were subjected to routine constraints and had little autonomy to creatively grow their knowledge and skills.

From my observation, I argue that the various mechanisms operating in this factory were not simply created to run the workplace and keep it 'orderly,' but they enabled and normalised the exercise of and submission to role-based power. The three-tier workplace hierarchy was a code according to which power presented itself and prescribed that people conceived of it. However, as factory members participated in production tasks around the operating power relations, they also carried their own sets of culturally-informed ideas, beliefs, and expectations into their interactions, which were merged with the power structure to create a unique workplace dynamic. The factory members' patterns of grievance management behaviour, for example, represent a distinct characteristic of management-labour relations at this factory that reflects a socio-cultural dimension. In many Chinese-run factories, grievance handling often turns confrontational, for example studies of Chinese-run enterprises in Africa suggest that African workers carry out different forms of resistance such as strikes, work stoppages, and subtle acts to challenge managerial authority and improve labour conditions.[266] In Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd, though, the expression of grievances generally embodied passive behaviours, and such grievances were managed using mostly non-institutionalised and non-unionised means. I suggest that

[266] Driessen (n 12).

these characteristics may be accounted for by the cultural convention of Myanmar and the social legacy of Maoist China.

In the following chapters of this thesis, I explore in more details the various differences in values, perceptions, expectations, and behaviours between the Chinese managers and Burmese workers, and I examine how these differences contribute to and shape management-labour relations in this factory.

CHAPTER FIVE – CONTRASTING PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

In this chapter, I analyse the interactions between Chinese expatriate managers and Burmese workers to identify differences in their understandings and expectations about how leadership and rule-based governance should look like. To begin, I briefly explain how 'cultural differences' in the straightforward sense, such as religion and language, did not have an overwhelming influence. In the next section, I examine the 'strict parent' style of Chinese leadership, and the expectations of Burmese workers that their managers should behave as an 'authoritative teacher.' Following that, I investigate their perspectives regarding the use of rules to govern the workplace, discussing how the Chinese managers implemented 'systematic management' while the Burmese workers tended to view rules as having a human dimension.

1. The 'East Meets East' Multicultural Environment

At first glance, the Chinese expatriate managers and Burmese staff of Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd seemed quite compatible with each other, at least from the Western point of view. Both sides are from Eastern cultures, and beyond the ordinary tensions between workers and managers that are common in any industrial setting, researchers do not expect many differences and problems to arise when individuals of 'similar' cultures work together under the same roof.

Based on somewhat stereotypical understanding of cultures, researchers usually anticipate problems to arise when the East meets the very different West, for example, leaders from the Eastern cultures considered more 'authoritarian' are likely to face resistance from 'self-willed' Western staff who expect employee participation and autonomy, and leaders from the Western cultures considered more 'democratic' may be met with scepticism from 'compliant' Eastern stuff who expect strong leadership and clear instructions. Not many observable problems would be expected to arise when East meets East, as the two Eastern cultures, Chinese and Burmese, are not really known for using confrontational approaches when dealing with conflict.[267] Moreover, Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd is a typical production-centred and labour-intensive garment factory with relatively simple management structure, where decisions are formulated by managers to be implemented by frontline workers in a straightforward manner, and there are limited channels for feelings of grievance to emerge as dispute and to be resolved openly by the people involved.

Are the Chinese managers and Burmese workers compatible with each other at the workplace? When asked about this, the Burmese workers were able to cite a few examples of 'cultural difference' between them and the Chinese managers that they had personally observed. The first and foremost was the difference in religious belief:

[267] See, for example, Cheng Lu Wang and others, 'Conflict Handling Styles in International Joint Ventures: A Cross-Cultural and Cross-National Comparison' (2005) 45 Management International Review 3; Xuejian Yu, 'The Chinese "Native" Perspective on Mao-Dun (Conflict) and Mao-Dun Resolution Strategies: A Qualitative Investigation' (1997) 7 Intercultural Communication Studies 63; May Cho Min and Jiro Takai, 'Emotional Competence, Conflict Management Styles, and Relational Factors: Cross-Cultural Comparison between Japan and Myanmar' (2019) XXVIII Intercultural Communication Studies 109.

> 'Chinese people don't have a religion, I think. A lot of Burmese people came here for the factory's grand opening and offered rice to the Buddha, but the Chinese didn't.'[268]

In Myanmar, Buddhism is practised by nearly 90% of the population, whereas in China only about 20% are Buddhists, while the rest either practice Chinese folk religion or are irreligious.[269] At times, therefore, despite some effort to show respect for Burmese culture, Chinese managers might not have sufficient understanding of Myanmar's religious custom. For instance, possibly out of good intention, they set up a Buddha worship area inside the factory for workers to use, but that area is too close to the toilet, and this is considered inappropriate by the workers.

There were other examples of 'cultural differences' noted and pointed out by factory staff. Workers would typically begin their workday by recording their attendance before the facial recognition machine. With his understanding of Burmese culture, Win Thin Hyint, a supervisor, was of the opinion that male and female workers should keep a distance from each other, and he criticised the 'unsuitable' physical contact between male and female workers that occurred frequently as a result of the crowd gathering before the machine. Win Zin Phyu, a female worker at the storage section, frowned upon the rumours that married Chinese men were 'fooling around' with Burmese women, and she thought Chinese culture had a very 'casual' attitude

[268] Interview 6, Burmese worker (frontline).
[269] WIN-Gallup International, 'Global Index of Religion and Atheism' (2012); Myanmar Department of Population, 'The Union Report: Religion' (2016).

towards marriage such that the Chinese people irresponsibly 'put their feelings above everything else.' As for the Chinese side, the Chinese managers could also state a few examples. 'We shouldn't touch their [Burmese people] head, and we shouldn't step on their feet … and when I summon a worker, I should have my palm faced down, not up, because having the palm facing up is considered disrespectful,' said Mr. Chun, a Chinese manager, though he had no idea of the reason behind these Burmese cultural norms.

Contrary to what many people might predict, the 'cultural differences' cited by factory staff, mostly related to religious belief and social customs, were not perceived to be a significant workplace integration barrier. Both Chinese managers and Burmese workers saw language as a problem, but this was alleviated with the assistance of interpreters, as well as using gestures and translation apps of smart phones. Although a few workers noted that at first they were nervous working with foreigners because they perceived foreigners to be very different, after just a few months they felt more comfortable. A worker even said he did not notice any specific 'cultural difference' at all, and he could only notice 'difference in skin colour.' In view of these findings, it may be tempting to deduce that cultural variables did not play any part in the workplace dynamic of Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd, given there did not appear to be many observable cultural clashes between Chinese managers and Burmese workers.

If one expects the same ways to express disagreement that observers tend to look for, it will appear that there is none in this 'East meets East' workplace. Therefore, it is

understandable why the 'East meets East' multicultural environment seems not to warrant much scholarly attention. Yet after months of stay in the factory of Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd, I indeed realised that the workplace was not as smooth and conflict-free as many would expect. The problems were actually there, but not exposed if we simply look at the number of complaints and court cases, which were not the appropriate indicators for the context. When we leverage an in-depth cultural perspective, we can move beyond simple generalisations and begin to discover the subtle nuances, as manifested in the factory staff's different cognitive and behavioural patterns in this 'East meets East' workplace, that create tensions, even if only in latent forms as yet.

2. Types of 'Autocratic' Leadership

In this section, I discuss the leadership and compliance behaviour exhibited by Chinese expatriate managers and Burmese workers respectively. The work environment of Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd was to a significant extent established and shaped by the management approach of the Chinese managers. Despite the existence of some individual differences, from my observation, the twelve Chinese managers overall shared similarities in leadership style, which was characterised by the use of more 'command-and-control' approach. As for the Burmese workers, with nearly a thousand of them, they comprised the overwhelming majority in the workplace environment of Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd. Their age, gender, education background, and work experience differed, but still they shared a lot in common. They were

Pakokku locals with limited work experience in the manufacturing industry, with almost no experience working with foreigners before joining the factory, and as I observed, they exhibited a similar set of expectations and behavioural patterns when dealing with Chinese managers on a regular basis.

2.1 Chinese Leaders and Burmese Followers

In this factory, as a top-down management approach was implemented, major decisions were made exclusively by the Chinese managers, leaving very little room for subordinate involvement, participation, and exchange of ideas in the decision-making process. This leadership approach of Chinese managers has been reported by other researchers of Chinese companies.[270] As described in the previous chapter, production meetings were held every week (usually Friday afternoon) to determine the coming week's schedule and output targets, and these were attended only by Chinese managers. The decisions reached during meetings were later communicated by Chinese managers to the Burmese supervisors in their respective sectional meetings, usually held the day after production meetings. The Burmese staff had very little influence, if not none in these decisions that were of great importance to their own work.

[270] Sheh Seow Wah, 'Chinese Cultural Values and Their Implication to Chinese Management' (2001) 23 Singapore Management Review 75; Kathleen J Krone, Mary Garrett and Ling Chen, 'Managerial Communication Practices in Chinese Factories: A Preliminary Investigation' (1992) 29 International Journal of Business Communication 229; EWK Tsang, 'Learning from Overseas Venturing Experience: The Case of Chinese Family Businesses' (2002) 17 Journal of Business Venturing 21.

Sectional meetings, like all meetings in the factory between Chinese managers and Burmese staff, were chaired by the Chinese managers. After attending many of these meetings as an observer, I noticed that a typical meeting would begin with the manager evaluating and criticising the supervisors' performance, for example them having failed to supervise the workers properly and/or meet the output targets. The manager would point out some specific 'mistakes' made by the supervisors that he or she identified, then this would be followed by giving specific instructions, orders, and reminders to the supervisors.

Occasionally during meetings, the Chinese managers might ask for input from Burmese supervisors. In some sectional meetings for example, the sewing section manager asked the supervisors to reflect upon their own performance. The mechanics section manager, after delivering his instructions, asked the supervisors for their views, including whether they noticed any improvement in their own performance after receiving months of training in the factory. But from my observation, the supervisors were not enthusiastic about voicing out, and their contribution hardly had much influence on the meetings. This was unsurprising, given that managers basically decided the meeting agenda and action items beforehand, and completely dominated the meetings. The Chinese managers might have suggested to Burmese staff that they were free to speak out and that their ideas would be accepted if considered 'reasonable.' But in reality, the workplace atmosphere made it very difficult for the Burmese staff to recognise it as a right to participate in the decision-making process and take initiative to share their ideas on equal footing with the Chinese managers.

When interacting with Burmese staff in the workplace, Chinese managers seemed to expect complete compliance whenever they exercised their authority. When giving instructions, although the Burmese staff were permitted to ask questions, it was very rare to see them interrupt their Chinese managers, let alone challenge or voice objection to their decisions. Ranging from production schedules, output targets, to disciplinary actions, after decisions were made, such decisions were in most cases unequivocal and final, as no formalised appeal mechanism existed.

The Burmese workers generally ascribed authority and exhibited observable signs of socially prescribed respect to the Chinese managers. They addressed Chinese managers by the Burmese term '*siya*,' meaning teacher or mentor. Some workers lowered their heads when Chinese managers walked past them. The perception of Chinese managers as having a higher teacher-like status could be further noted during the Thadingyut Festival, which is an annual festival in Myanmar celebrating Buddha's descent from heaven. The Burmese people usually take this opportunity to pay homage to monks, elderly people, parents, and teachers. During my stay, I experienced the celebration of Thadingyut Festival in the factory. Many Burmese workers gave offerings to the Chinese managers by kneeling on the floor, holding their joined palms to the forehead, and bending down to touch the floor. This act of paying tribute and showing gratitude through cultural protocol, combined with a commonplace expression of politeness and deference through verbal and body

language, could be taken by an observer as a sign of showing great respect to the Chinese managers.

While the Chinese managers expected absolute compliance from their staff, the Burmese workers demonstrated compliance to a large extent. In face of Chinese managers dominating the decision-making process, the Burmese workers usually unquestionably followed the instructions delivered by their '*siya*,' and I could hardly observe workers refusing to follow orders, disagreeing with decisions, or openly expressing frustration or anger at the way they have been treated. It was, in fact, quite rare for a worker to overtly articulate their personal views or feelings to the Chinese manager. Besides, for the frontline workers, most of their communication was with the supervisor instead of the managers, so when a frontline worker encountered problems at work, no matter technical issues or any other personnel problems that hindered shop floor operation, they would first ask the supervisors for help. Only when the problems proved too difficult then they would seek help from the managers.

Even the Burmese supervisors, who communicated with Chinese managers frequently, were hesitant about voicing out or expressing emotions in reaction to the way they were treated. In the sectional meetings, the Burmese supervisors after listening to the criticisms made by Chinese managers towards their performance would be asked to engage in 'self-reflection,' but most of the time, they would simply reiterate the managers' advice, such as 'supervise closely,' 'learn how to supervise well,' 'deliver properly.' Interestingly, some reflections like 'not to berate people' were

met with disagreement, as the Chinese manager clarified how 'berating just needs to be reasonable,' and this will be further discussed below to illustrate the difference in leadership behaviour between Chinese managers and Burmese supervisors. When the Chinese managers asked for input, often there would be no response at all from the supervisors. Although this does not necessarily mean that the Burmese staff were fully content with the leadership behaviour imposed by Chinese managers, there was not much indication that they resented the Chinese managers' approach and expressed a preference for more participation or voicing their needs in the decision-making process, as one may expect in a Western work environment.

How do we explain the cognitive and behavioural patterns of Chinese managers and Burmese workers in relation to their ideas of what 'good leadership' looks like? Given the above observations of their similarities, it may be tempting to apply all-encompassing labels like 'collectivism' to reach a simple conclusion that there is no difference in leadership expectations. Indeed, scholars have argued that compliance, obedience, responsibility, and conformity form the key aspects of socialisation in 'collectivist' societies.[271] Yet, coining the image of both Chinese and Burmese people with such concept is not helpful, since it limits us to certain fixed worldviews, absolves us from the responsibility of considering the insiders' view, and causes us to miss the nuances. Much more can be revealed if we interpret the behaviour of Chinese managers and Burmese workers from their own point of view, and within their own

[271] Abbas J Ali and others, 'Individualism, Collectivism, and Decision Styles of Managers in Kuwait' (1997) 137 Journal of Social Psychology 629; Arash Heydari, Ali Teymoori and EF Haghish, 'Socioeconomic Status, Perceived Parental Control, and Authoritarianism: Development of Authoritarianism in Iranian Society' (2013) 16 Asian Journal of Social Psychology 228.

historical and cultural contexts. An understanding of their personal belief system will provide a good starting point.

2.2 'Strict Parent' Style of Chinese Leadership

Although the Chinese managers might not have these qualities, or they might doubt that others have, it is interesting to observe how they perceived leaders, on top of everything, as the driving force of progress in an organisation, and how they believed that leaders alone are in the best position to decide what would be in the interest for their subordinates and the organisation. As Mr. Mei, a Chinese manager, commented, 'The best means of management must be the leader. The workers are only as good as the manager.' Ethnographic studies of Chinese enterprises operating in other countries have identified Chinese expatriate managers' behaviour as paternalistic and autocratic,[272] and in this workplace, the Chinese managers did appear to display such tendency. Behaving like a 'strict parent,' their relationship with subordinates were like with their children, as they assumed near absolute authority and responsibility.

The Chinese managers' vision of the leader as 'strict parent' bears some similarities to the 'paternalistic leadership' construct developed by researchers of Chinese organisations. Composed of three dimensions, namely, authoritarianism, benevolence, and morality, 'paternalistic leadership' is suggested by Farh and Cheng to be

[272] Shuo Wang, 'Your next Boss Is Chinese: How European Employees Perceive Organizational Cultures in Chinese Multinational Companies.' (University of Eastern Finland 2017) <http://epublications.uef.fi/pub/urn_isbn_978-952-61-3021-7/urn_isbn_978-952-61-3021-7.pdf> accessed 7 December 2020; Nyíri Pál, 'Chinese Investors, Labour Discipline and Developmental Cosmopolitanism' (2013) 44 Development and Change 1387.

prevalent in overseas Chinese family business.[273] Researchers have commented that the overall 'paternalistic leadership' construct is 'not very useful,' given that findings on the psychological processes underlying the effect of this construct are mixed, and the model regarding this construct is not fully supported by empirical studies.[274] This is likely because while the construct of 'paternalistic leadership' suffices to contrast between acting paternalistically and acting on the basis of equality, the idea of 'parent' may vary among Chinese people, making it better to, as Lau, Li, and Okpara suggest, examine leadership behaviour as a whole rather than deconstruct it into separate and distinct dimensions.[275]

In the eyes of the Chinese managers in this factory, the Burmese staff were like children — obedient, respectful, and willing to learn, yet inadequate and incapable of working on their own. As a Chinese manager put it, the workers were 'slow learners' lacking in knowledge and experience. It might not be too difficult to lead the Burmese workers and make progress, but this would only be possible when 'good leaders with organisational skills' take charge. Stressing the importance of obedience, the Chinese managers assumed that workers' first and foremost responsibility was to obey their leader. The Burmese staff were expected to be dependent on their leader for work

[273] Jiing-Lih Farh and Or-Shiuan Cheng, 'A Cultural Analysis of Paternalistic Leadership in Chinese Organizations' in JT Li, Anne S Tsui and Elizabeth Weldon (eds), *Management and Organizations in the Chinese Context* (St Martin's Press 2000).
[274] Min Wu and others, 'Perceived Interactional Justice and Trust-in-Supervisor as Mediators for Paternalistic Leadership' (2012) 8 Management and Organization Review 97; Liang Guo and others, 'Authoritarian Leadership and Employee Creativity: The Moderating Role of Psychological Capital and the Mediating Role of Fear and Defensive Silence' (2018) 92 Journal of Business Research 219.
[275] Wai Kwan Lau, Zhen Li and John Okpara, 'An Examination of Three-Way Interactions of Paternalistic Leadership in China' (2020) 26 Asia Pacific Business Review 32.

orders and instructions, to be quick to accept responsibility and apologise when they were accused of making mistakes.

The Chinese managers stated they might accept workers' suggestions, complaints, and requests, if such were deemed 'reasonable.' However, given their leadership approach and their perception of the workers, they were actually reluctant to consider workers' opinion. They thought it would be impossible to 'cater to everybody's needs' in a factory with about a thousand workers, and they insisted that decisions, after being made, must be enforced despite objection from the 'noisy minority.' As a Chinese manager, Mr. Qiu, commented:

> 'Someone will still be unhappy even if you give them the same big pot of rice [equal treatment]. Even if the workers keep complaining, we won't accommodate them if we think their request is unreasonable.'[276]

By insisting on complete obedience from followers and having a final say on all key decisions, the leadership style of Chinese managers may be interpreted by many as 'authoritarian' or even 'despotic.' [277] The Chinese managers' personal values reinforced a command-and-control hierarchy, making it a strictly 'top thinks and local

[276] Interview 27, Chinese manager.
[277] Chao-Chuan Chen and Yueh-Ting Lee, *Leadership and Management in China: Philosophies, Theories, and Practices* (Cambridge University Press 2008).

acts' system with very limited possibility for subordinates to think for themselves and foster changes on their own.[278]

Possibly as the means to strengthen their authority as the 'strict parent,' there were occasional manifestations of public criticism and angry tantrum from the Chinese managers, which could be considered rude and inappropriate if Western ethical norms are applied. At the same time, the Chinese managers wanted to be seen as reasonable, responsible, and admirable leaders. They would explain to their staff why extra hours of work were necessary, before requesting them to work overtime. After criticising her staff, Ms Ying, the sewing section Chinese manager, would ask them to reflect upon the alleged 'mistakes' (which usually meant the failure to meet certain expectations), then followed by her expression of a sense of responsibility:

> 'If you don't do your job well, it also means that I didn't teach you well.
> I'm also responsible if you guys don't do your job well.'[279]

Aryee and colleagues argue that authoritarian leadership style is positively related to 'abusive supervision' — subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviours.[280] As I observed, public criticism was quite common in the factory. Chinese managers

[278] Peter Senge, 'Building Learning Organizations' (1992) 15 The Journal for Quality and Participation 30.
[279] Interview 46, Chinese manager.
[280] Samuel Aryee and others, 'Antecedents and Outcomes of Abusive Supervision: Test of a Trickle-down Model' (2007) 92 Journal of Applied Psychology 191; Bennett J Tepper, Lauren Simon and Hee Man Park, 'Abusive Supervision' (2017) 4 Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior 123.

often told their subordinates off in the presence of others, and this might be regarded by some other researchers as a typical indicator of abusive supervision.[281] This phenomenon was somehow consistent with the observation in some scholarship that Chinese subordinates reported a higher level of abusive supervision than subordinates in other countries such as the United States.[282]

I would argue, nevertheless, that a common problem in the West is to perceive these Chinese-run power arrangements in isolation or in partiality, and inappropriately conclude that they reflect clear inclinations and structural inducements towards sheer authoritarianism, autocracy, or even despotism. The same behaviour may be perceived from a particular point of view and from one set of values to be abusive, yet, that may be neither the intention nor the interpretation of the Chinese managers themselves. Instead, a contextualising approach should be used to untangle cultural nuances and develop understanding of Chinese supervisory behaviour as rooted in the specific cultural context. Reflecting her views on the behavior that might be considered 'abusive,' Ms Ying shared with me why she frequently rebuked her staff:

> 'It's important to be serious and demanding at work. I scold them because I want to teach them everything I know and help them

[281] Bor-Shiuan Cheng, 'Hierarchical Structure and Chinese Organizational Behavior' (1995) 3 Indigenous Psychological Research in Chinese Societies 142.
[282] Su Ying Pan and Katrina Jia Lin, 'Who Suffers When Supervisors Are Unhappy? The Roles of Leader–Member Exchange and Abusive Supervision' (2018) 151 Journal of Business Ethics 799; Changya Hu, Tsung Yu Wu and Yu Hsuan Wang, 'Measurement Equivalence/Invariance of the Abusive Supervision Measure across Workers from Taiwan and the United States' (2011) 145 Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied 111.

> improve. Once I stop scolding them, it means I've given up on them!'[283]

Ms Ying's words suggest that her reprimand was meant to be more than reasserting authority and obtaining compliance. It was seen as a responsibility of managers like her to scrutinise workers' performance, correct their mistakes, and teach them how to improve. Therefore, being criticised harshly at work was framed as a part of the workers' process of personal development, a proof that the Chinese managers 'cared' about them and was eager to inculcate a sense of responsibility into them. The importance of this sense of responsibility was commonly used as the reason to reprimand Burmese staff:

> 'It doesn't matter whether it's a junior supervisor or the receive and dispatch officer, I will scold them if they don't keep good records. Because if they can't even handle their basic duties, how can they handle anything else? So I scold them. They don't dare say anything when I scold them!'[284]

Provided that reprimand was framed as beneficial to the Burmese workers, Chinese managers largely did not perceive it as a manifestation of 'abusive supervision.' Like how scolding, in the context of parent socialisation in China, is seen by many as the

[283] Interview 46, Chinese manager.
[284] Interview 46, Chinese manager.

most effective method to teach children,[285] the Chinese managers saw reprimand as a caring and reasonable act of the 'strict parent,' since the workers were assumed to have received appropriate guidance to achieve improvement. While they acknowledged that harsh criticisms might be perceived by some workers as disrespectful, it was distinguished from 'abusive supervision' of a hostile nature, and that the workers' compliant behaviour was interpreted as a proof that such criticisms were perceived by workers as the 'right thing.'

Exhibiting authoritarian leadership behaviour as the 'strict parent,' the Chinese managers behaved in a commanding fashion in front of the Burmese workers and resorted to punishment when the rules were not followed. Nonetheless, they were cognisant of a need to occasionally display a 'soft' side and explain calmly to workers the reason for their punishment. Ms. Zhen, a manager at the sewing section, acknowledged that the Burmese workers might not blindly accept her authority if she simply bossed them around all the time. Another sewing section manager Ms. Ying would sometimes engage in lengthy 'discussions' with her staff after reproaching them:

> 'After I criticise them, I need to talk to them. How come I'm so angry? This is a serious matter, so they have to be meticulous. Explain

[285] See F Lieh-Mak, SY Chung and YW Liu, 'Characteristics of Child Battering in Hong Kong: A Controlled Study' (1983) 142 British Journal of Psychiatry 89; Yuk chung Chan, Gladys LT Lam and Wan Chaw Shae, 'Children's Views on Child Abuse and Neglect: Findings from an Exploratory Study with Chinese Children in Hong Kong' (2011) 35 Child Abuse and Neglect 162; Vanessa L Fong, 'Parent-Child Communication Problems and the Perceived Inadequacies of Chinese Only Children' (2007) 35 Ethos 85.

> it to them many times, and they'll get it. So when they make a product, I tell them we have to do it a certain way. To sell in other countries, the product must be delivered to the customer. If the product is bad, people will complain, and eventually we'll lose customers. That's why we have to make sure our products are good. That's how I explain it to them.'[286]

It may appear to be contradictory for the Chinese managers to expect obedience and admiration at the same time, but given their leadership approach which is suggestive of a strict parenting style in Chinese understanding, their target was to instil genuine obedience and respect for management in the workers. They wanted the workers to see them as the 'role model,' like how Ms. Zhen commented, 'It's much better to let the workers admire you from the bottom of their hearts, than being afraid of you and do not dare speak to you.' In front of the workers, the Chinese managers were eager to demonstrate their superior and skills, as they thought the workers would thereby hold them in high regard and become even more obedient to them.

Being the 'strict parents' that emphasis discipline and accountability, the Chinese managers were not too keen to demonstrate a loving and virtuous side. 'As a manager, there's no benevolence,' said Mr Mei. 'If you're benevolent you can't do your job well'. This is not to say that the Chinese managers were emotionless robots who lacked the wish to establish any connections with their staff. For example, there was a time that

[286] Interview 46, Chinese manager.

they provided some financial assistance and sent condolences to a senior supervisor whose close family member passed away. By and large, though, the Chinese managers were rather indifferent to the needs and concerns of their Burmese staff, particularly the frontline workers. This rare display of 'benevolence' to workers was only seen as a necessary strategy to generate positive reciprocity, as Mr. Chun said, 'We can't let the workers think this factory does not care about them.'

2.3 'Authoritative Teacher' Style of Burmese Expectations

As subordinates, the Burmese workers identified their status within their cultural set of meanings including the accompanying socially expected communication pattern. Addressing the Chinese managers as '*siya*,' the Burmese workers thought it was their responsibility to show 'respect' to their 'teachers,' and this 'respect' primarily takes the form of absolute obedience — refraining from speaking out, complaining, or talking back. During the interviews, a junior supervisor and a frontline worker shared how and why they would stay silent when they were rebuked by the Chinese managers in an evidently rude manner:

> 'No matter how bad I look, I wouldn't do anything. I'm working under Chinese people now, that's my job, I'm under the boss, so I have to respect the boss, even though I want to talk back at him.'[287]

[287] Interview 34, Burmese worker (junior supervisor).

'Because they're my "*siya*," I don't want to argue with them.'[288]

It was evident in these words that the intention was to demonstrate absolute obedience. The Burmese workers were not pleased to have been reprimanded. But the Chinese managers, by virtue of the managerial position, were perceived by the Burmese workers to be 'above' them in the hierarchy, hence they thought that appropriate signs of respect must be shown to the Chinese managers by tolerating behaviour akin to abusive supervision. The combination of the Chinese managers' higher perceived status with their accepted role as 'teacher' contributed to creating an image with a culturally expected set of capabilities.

The Burmese workers had high expectations for the leaders to be smarter, more brilliant, more experienced, and more knowledgeable than them. Leaders are looked upon favourably for their ability to shoulder the responsibility of overseeing factory operation and delivering instructions. In this regard, the Chinese managers in this factory were able to meet some of the expectations. They were viewed as highly competent and hardworking leaders who placed total focus on their tasks. In the packing section, a Burmese worker compared his current manager to one in a factory he used to work in, and he found it admirable that the current manager was able to step in and take charge of the situation:

[288] Interview 36, Burmese worker (frontline).

> 'The manager in the factory I used to work in didn't really care about the stuff there. But here, my "siya" is always checking stuff out, and working on his computer to review production plans.'[289]

By stating that the work style of the manager is 'really good,' it can be concluded that this worker perceived his current 'teacher' to be able to meet his expectations with regards to work ability. The hardworking and responsible image of the Chinese managers was shared by Burmese workers at different levels:

> 'They're smart and brilliant. Oh, and they're healthy. While they're old, they can work for a long time without needing to rest!'[290]

> 'They're so smart, I envy them. The Chinese people seem to never get tired, even when they're old.'[291]

> 'I envy her a lot, she teaches me a lot of knowledge.'[292]

Within their cultural context, the dynamic of leadership is understood by Burmese workers as a teacher-pupil relationship based on principles of obedience and superiority. This vision shares similarities with the Chinese managers' vision of leadership as the 'strict parent,' but unlike parent-child relationship, this teacher-pupil

[289] Interview 21, Burmese worker (frontline).
[290] Interview 30, Burmese worker (senior supervisor).
[291] Interview 31, Burmese worker (frontline).
[292] Interview 34, Burmese worker (junior supervisor).

relationship carries a strong expectation of mutual respect, room for negotiation, and possibility of kindness. In addition to having excellent mentoring qualities, the Burmese workers expected the Chinese managers to treat them in a friendly and caring manner, or even like a friend. As the Burmese workers described the idea of a 'good leader':

> 'My definition of a good manager is... He knows the technical stuff and has more experience than me, and is open to negotiations. He's friendly, flexible, and easy going.'[293]

> 'He tries to make the workers happy, celebrate the workers' anniversaries, and is there for them when they have problems.'[294]

To the Burmese workers, therefore, a good manager is not the strict and relentless rule-enforcer. He or she should be like an 'authoritative teacher' — knowledgeable and competent, yet kind and understanding, someone who mingles with workers like a friend. The workers thought an 'authoritative teacher' can make the workers happy and as a result, improve the factory's productivity:

> 'When you control the workers too strictly, they won't be happy, they'll lose confidence in you, and factory production won't go well.

[293] Interview 57, Burmese worker (frontline).
[294] Interview 18, Burmese worker (senior supervisor).

> You've got to take the "middle way," be friendly and take care of your workers.'[295]

Hence, the Burmese workers expressed leadership ideas in a manner that was different from the Chinese managers, based on the image of the 'authoritative teacher.' This set of expectations led them to assume that Chinese managers were strict and overly task-oriented. On the one hand, they expected the Chinese managers to be competent and skilled leaders, but on the other, they criticised them for being too focused on their jobs and not sensitive enough to other people's needs, as they believed the 'authoritative teacher' would also be understanding of the 'students.' It is expected that an 'authoritative teacher' would be patient and not rush to judgement when analysing a problem. An employee at the packing section, Phyo Yen Aung, recalled that he was once blamed by his manager for an alleged mistake that he did not make, but that manager would not listen to him:

> 'They [Chinese managers] can't just believe everything they're told; they must observe and decide whether the information is true or false, and not judge everything when they're there.'[296]

It is noteworthy that what fell short of Burmese workers' expectations was the detached management style of the Chinese managers, rather than their 'authoritarian' management approach. In other words, it was about them being too quick to judge

[295] Interview 36, Burmese worker (frontline).
[296] Interview 21, Burmese worker (frontline).

and not empathetic enough, rather than their means and process of decision-making; what they considered missing was not their rights as workers, but a human touch to leadership. What they wanted was an 'authoritative teacher' who would understand them and treat them politely, and that their wish to be treated well did not include greater work independence and personal say in their jobs, which, as Befort suggested, is a common work expectation in cultures such as the United States and the Nordic countries. Compared with workers in these cultures, there was little expectation expressed by the Burmese workers that they should be consulted about their work and their voice should be heard in the organisation that they worked in.

Imagining the leadership dynamic to resemble teacher-pupil relationship, the Burmese workers imagined themselves to behave like 'obedient pupils.' They described it as their duty to develop a strong sense of responsibility, strive for their best, and stay motivated and self-disciplined at work:

> 'Since the deadlines are getting closer, and the workers and Chinese managers know when they are, there shouldn't be any need [for Chinese managers] to put pressure on the workers. The workers should just know that, and work hard on their own.'[297]

As conforming and obedient 'pupils,' the Burmese workers would recognise the organisational goals and try to work towards them without constant reminder from

[297] Interview 5, Burmese worker (senior supervisor).

the 'teachers,' but they would rarely explore other possibilities of dealing with a situation independently and assertively. They did not expect themselves to take a change-oriented approach, and there were few attempts to display proactive work behaviour, such as seeking out information, identifying opportunities for improvement, proposing constructive change-oriented suggestions, and working creatively to fulfil organisational goals.[298] After all, 'obedient pupils' are at most needed to play an active part to participate in the 'learning environment' designed by the 'authoritative teachers,' and they risk facing 'demerits' for attempting to deviate from established practices.

To sum up this section, my findings suggest that for the Chinese expatriate managers, leadership means managing the work environment with authority and efficiency like a capable parent who always knows best. With impression of their staff as incapable and inexperienced 'children,' the Chinese managers considered themselves the only ones who can fulfil a management role, thus deserving respect and deference from their 'child-like' subordinates. This understanding of leadership expressed itself in strict control and demonstration of power over the workplace, as there was little effort to show benevolence to their followers. As for the Burmese workers, although they did not expect participating and delegating leadership styles, good leadership to them means being authoritative and fashioning a more people-oriented environment. In

[298] Jerry Bryan Fuller, Laura E Marler and Kim Hester, 'Erratum: Promoting Felt Responsibility for Constructive Change and Proactive Behavior: Exploring Aspects of an Elaborated Model of Work Design' (2006) 27 Journal of Organizational Behavior 1089.

addition to demonstrating professional competence and supervision ability, they wanted their leaders to pay attention and take care of the welfare of in-group members.

Whereas both the Chinese managers and Burmese workers had the vision of good leaders as being strong in character and even autocratic, my findings show that the Burmese workers' expectations diverge from the favoured practices of the Chinese managers. The different understandings of good leadership, inevitably, leads to mismatch in expectations and behaviour which can cause dissatisfaction among both sides.

3. Rules and Governance in Respective Socio-Cultural Contexts

In this section, I discuss the cognitive and behavioural tendencies of Chinese expatriate managers and Burmese workers in relation to workplace governance using formal rules and policies. Coming from different socio-cultural backgrounds, there were differences in their ideas and expectations about the norms of governance and rule-following within an organisational setting.

With managerial thinking resembling a command-and-control approach, the Chinese managers emphasised, in addition to centralised decision-making and top-down hierarchies, the need for 'systematic management' ('*xitong guanli*'), of which important components are formalistic tendencies, extensive use of factory rules, and emphasis on repeated measurement of outputs and targets. The Burmese workers, under the

governance of Chinese managers, largely complied with the arrangements, but at times, they had difficulties coping with certain policies and dealing with the interactive relationship between people and rules.

Through recollection of workplace incident by the Burmese staff, I discuss the emergence of tensions when different perceptions of rules came together and were combined with nuances of workplace relationships. I analyse such perceptions with existing conceptions, particularly rule-based and relation-based governance, of which the former is enforced by transparent, fair, and impartially applied rules, and the latter is about using personal relations to establish implicit and non-verifiable agreements to circumvent the formalised regulatory system.

3.1 Chinese Approach of 'Systematic Management'

On the whole, the Chinese managers were very task motivated people. To facilitate management and ensure production targets could be met, they used advanced planning, recorded hourly, daily, weekly output, and tried to find ways to measure individual workers' performance. For example, Mr. Zhou, a Chinese manager of the packing section, kept a notebook recording the details of his workers like their name, position, and absence record, so that in his words, he 'would not even need to remember people's names.' Working in Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd, a factory still in its relative infancy as of 2020, the Chinese managers were constantly trying to seek what they believed as more effective management methods that would improve productivity and efficiency.

Striving for increased productivity and performance, the Chinese managers showed an inclination to use management approach with a high degree of formalism to regulate the workplace, of which operations were established through strict rules and structured procedures to be inscribed within clear policies and upheld with rigorous standards.[299] As suggested by Mr. Mei, a Chinese manager of the sewing section:

> 'As the boss, I'd make sure there was systematic management, clear rules for every work procedure, and somebody to oversee it and be accountable for it. That way, we can get things done well.'[300]

'Systematic management' was thought to be key to the factory's success, and contrarily without a rule-based 'system,' quoting the words of Mr. Mei, 'things would be so disorganised, you simply can't do anything.' Chinese managers' understanding of 'systematic management' largely came from what they learnt and personally experienced in the factories in China, and they favoured Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd to similarly adopt those strict practices. For example, one of the Chinese managers recalled that in China's garment factories, when a manager requested workers to work until eight p.m., the security guard would switch off all the lights at exactly eight p.m. and urge all people to leave, unless the manager applied in advance for extra work

[299] The preference for 'formality' expressed by the Chinese managers shares similarities with 'formality' described in Susan Marlow, Scott Taylor and Amanda Thompson, 'Informality and Formality in Medium-Sized Companies: Contestation and Synchronization' (2010) 21 British Journal of Management 954.

[300] Interview 40, Chinese manager.

hours. Another Chinese manager recalled how workers' toilet use was regulated by an access card system recording the time and duration of toilet use, such that workers would not be able to slack off in the toilet, since only one card was assigned to each production line, and any worker who stayed in the toilet for too long would receive complaints from other workers assigned to the same line. Although as of the time of my fieldwork, these monitoring mechanisms were yet to be implemented, Chinese managers seemed to be convinced that these mechanisms, if applied in this factory, would enable a stricter enforcement of rules to significantly improve the factory's operation.

It may appear that Chinese managers' liking for formalistic and rule-based management was simply catering to the productivity demands of a busy garment factory. For example, in her study of Chinese-run footwear factories in China, Chan noted that there were many strict rules imposing penalties, fines, and even control of workers' bodily functions, and she attributed this to the need of labour-intensive industries to cope with enormous competitive wage pressures.[301] There are, however, deeper reasons for this preference. Apart from the difficulty in establishing informal relationships as an instrument of control, leaders with autocratic tendencies are inclined to exert control by issuing rules and threatening punishment for disobedience, since these 'systems' and rules may convey the impression of being authoritative yet impartial.[302] 'Using relationships to manage won't work,' stated Mr Chun, a Chinese

[301] Anita Chan, 'Globalization, China's Free (Read Bonded) Labour Market, and the Chinese Trade Unions' (2000) 6 Asia Pacific Business Review 260.
[302] Aryee and others (n 280).

manager. 'It's hard to be "humanistic" ('*renxing*') when managing production.' Drawing comparison between the 'system' and law, Chinese manager Mr. Mei considered himself to be akin to some kind of law enforcement officers who represented the higher authority:

> 'Because the boss designed the system, how can you challenge me if I follow it? You're criticising the boss when you criticise the system.'[303]

From his words, it can be seen that Mr. Mei was of the view that the workers would be treated equally before the 'system,' and he was confident in his ability to get rid of his 'humanistic' side and become an impartial enforcer of factory rules. As Mr. Mei further explained:

> 'In my approach, I never put people before their performance. If a worker makes a mistake, it doesn't matter who they are.'[304]

This quote suggests that Mr. Mei perceived himself to be akin to a neutral 'law enforcement officer' who would judge objectively without giving preference to those that he had closer relationship with. Just like law, the system of rules and procedures in this factory is about the particular way to impose social power — to control, protect against, or affect the conduct of others, which is backed by coercion, and justified in

[303] Interview 40, Chinese manager.
[304] Interview 40, Chinese manager.

the legalistic sense by the supposed impartiality of application and the goals of fairness and objective order.[305]

From this perspective of understanding the system of rules and procedures as 'law' of the factory, the Chinese manager, with a perception that all are equal before the 'law' and that this 'law' functions as an impartial mechanism for regulating behaviour,[306] was exhibiting a form of legal consciousness that understood and portrayed the 'law' as highly legitimate on its own. As Chinese managers upheld the 'law' and enforced it in a manner they considered as predictable, rational, and impartial, legitimacy of this 'law' and ultimately of the factory management, was thought to have been enhanced through this 'deliberate indifference to the particularities of biography or personality.'[307] The formalistic apparatus of 'law' became synonymous with legality, deriving from the authority of the factory owner, as 'law' became a thing with its own power. The Chinese managers also felt protected by this 'law,' since they knew that it allowed them to shift personal responsibility onto an impersonal collective pyramid that is directed from the top.

During my discussions with the Chinese managers, some of them suggested to me how certain aspects of the factory were not 'systematic' enough, one example being that the output of individual workers in the sewing and packing sections was not put

[305] Roger Cotterrell, *Law's Community: Legal Theory in Sociological Perspective* (Clarendon Press 1995); Fernanda Pirie, *The Anthropology of Law* (Oxford University Press 2013).
[306] See the discussion of legal consciousness in Patricia Ewick and Susan S Silbey, *The Common Place of Law: Stories from Everyday Life* (University of Chicago Press 1998).
[307] Ewick & Silbey, *supra* note 4, p. 76.

into record, hence it was difficult to assess workers' performance objectively. Does favouring clarity in measuring performance reflect Chinese managers' intention to treat workers in a fairer manner? Given the utilitarian and productivity-oriented mindset of the Chinese managers, this is more likely a reflection of their desire to simply bolster the notion that the 'law' is objective and impartial, through which workplace order could garner increased legitimacy and hence compliance from the workers. It may not matter whether the 'law' was actually perceived by the Burmese workers as impartial. So long as there were seemingly objective measurements and efforts to uphold impartiality such that impartiality was 'seen to be done,' the Burmese workers were expected to comply with workplace arrangement and refrain from challenging managerial authority, thus allowing the Chinese managers to face fewer worker complaints and secure better control over the workplace.

Given that Chinese people are frequently described in literature as relation-focused, and that relationships in China are said to be maintained by '*guanxi,*' which is the networks of structured engagements involving reciprocity, obligation, moral assessment, and assurance of trust,[308] it may be surprising to some observers that the Chinese managers showed a very rule-oriented, formalist, and legalist tendency in governance. In China, decades of economic reforms were accompanied by state-led efforts to shift away from relation-based governance, such as the introduction of new labour law compelling enterprises to establish a more rules for the management of

[308] See the discussion in Jack Barbalet, 'The Structure of Guanxi: Resolving Problems of Network Assurance' (2014) 43 Theory and Society 51; Wilfried R Vanhonacker, 'Guanxi Networks in China: How to Be the Spider, Not the Fly' (2004) 31 China Business Review 48.

human resources.[309] It was probably due to such regulatory changes and the intensifying competition that managers in China gradually shifted to a more rule-based and systematic form of organisational governance, like how Hong Kong and Taiwan, being culturally similar to China, became more rule-based societies in the course of their rapid economic development.[310]

Still, relationalism is deeply entrenched in the mainstream of Chinese thinking, and some scholars argue that China will probably never transit to rule-based governance.[311] Luo and Cheng suggest '*guanxi*' circles still constitute a major factor in Chinese intraorganisational behaviour, as it functions as a common mechanism to incentivise honouring of promises in business relationships.[312] In the context of this factory, the Chinese managers made effort to establish '*guanxi*' with the Burmese government. They behaved in a respectful and even obedient manner before the Burmese government officials, and sent 'gifts' to them in hope of securing preferential treatment like faster bureaucratic processes and the 'right' to circumvent labour laws regulating work hours. While Myanmar's business environment, often pervaded by bureaucratic delay, may encourage the use of informal relationships, the emphasis of

[309] Shaomin Li, 'China's (Painful) Transition from Relation-Based to Rule-Based Governance: When and How, Not If and Why' (2013) 21 Corporate Governance: An International Review 567; Xiaoya Liang, Jant H Marler and Zhiyu Cui, 'Human Resource Management in China: East Meets West' (2012) 26 Academy of Management Perspectives 55; Cheryl Xiaoning Long, 'Does the Rights Hypothesis Apply to China?' (2010) 53 Journal of Law and Economics 629.

[310] Jean François Hennart, 'Leveraging Asian Institutions to Deepen Theory: A Transaction Cost Perspective on Relational Governance' (2015) 14 Asian Business and Management 257.

[311] Kun Luen Alex Lau and Angus Young, 'Why China Shall Not Completely Transit from a Relation Based to a Rule Based Governance Regime: A Chinese Perspective' (2013) 21 Corporate Governance: An International Review 577.

[312] Jar Der Luo and Meng Yu Cheng, 'Guanxi Circles' Effect on Organizational Trust: Bringing Power and Vertical Social Exchanges Into Intraorganizational Network Analysis' (2015) 59 American Behavioral Scientist 1024; Lau and Young (n 311).

Chinese managers on *'guanxi'* does indicate a cultural practice that traces its roots to a relation-based tendency.

'Guanxi' as a practice can be understood as a form of social capital on attaining monetary and personal gains. It is a careful calculation to navigate power relations and manipulate others to achieve a desired goal. However, informal relations in Chinese society are more nuanced than mere pragmatic calculations as suggested in studies of *'guanxi'*. As Di Wu discusses in his research of Chinese migrants in Zambia, there is interactional affection among Chinese people through a focus on emotional proximity, and on such affective *'guanxi'* occasions, monetary calculations can be seen as damaging.[313] He observed that the Chinese managers in Zambia, therefore, refused to meet Zambian workers' request of borrowing money, as the involvement of monetary calculations would potentially damage their relationship with workers. Sometimes, there is overlapping between the self-interested and affective perspectives of *'guanxi'*. In China, management-labour relations maintained by *'guanxi'* often spans into off-work or personal domains, and these close personal ties enable workers to derive a sense of reliance and protection as managers maintain control over them.[314]

In our context, while it was a possibility for the Chinese managers to develop interactional affection with the Burmese, the nature of *'guanxi'* building — a culturally

[313] Wu (n 12).
[314] Jun Liu and others, 'Why Do I Feel Valued and Why Do I Contribute? A Relational Approach to Employee's Organization-Based Self-Esteem and Job Performance' (2013) 50 Journal of Management Studies 1018; Xin An Zhang, Ning Li and T Brad Harris, 'Putting Non-Work Ties to Work: The Case of Guanxi in Supervisor-Subordinate Relationships' (2015) 26 Leadership Quarterly 37.

informed process whereby individuals construct familiarity based on similarities [315] — made it a very difficult task for them. Chinese expatriate managers often cultivate *'guanxi'* with other Chinese people through gift exchange and creating relations of dependence, obligation, friendship, reliance, and trust.[316] However, researchers have suggested that Chinese managers abroad are unable to develop *'guanxi'* with non-Chinese people effectively because of 'cultural differences' and language barrier.[317] The same seems to be the case for most Chinese managers in the site, since they could speak very little Burmese and sometimes displayed an attitude, as described by a Chinese-Burmese interpreter, of 'looking down upon' the Burmese people. Understandably, barely able to establish personal relations with the workers outside of work domain, strict application of factory rules and hierarchical policies became the Chinese managers' primary if not only means to exert control over their staff.

Chinese managers' different attitudes in dealing with Burmese government officials and Burmese workers also suggest there may be different aspects of *'guanxi'*, at different levels of economic and political hierarchy, and amongst people in different relations of power. As foreigners subject to local administrative discretion, Chinese managers probably considered it necessary to maintain pragmatic *'guanxi'* with Burmese officials who held power over them. As managers in the Chinese-run factory though, they were in a position of power to manipulate the workers and achieve a

[315] Meiling Wong, 'Guanxi Management as Complex Adaptive Systems: A Case Study of Taiwanese ODI in China' (2010) 91 Journal of Business Ethics 419.
[316] Driessen (n 12).
[317] See the examples discussed in Lan Lin, Dai Wang and Yue Fang Si, 'The Limits of Guanxi for Chinese Nationals Doing Business Abroad: Empirical Investigation into Chinese Companies in Germany' (2018) 109 Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie 420; Barbara Xiaoyu Wang, *Guanxi in the Western Context: Intra-Firm Group Dynamics and Expatriate Adjustment* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019).

desired outcome through their own discretion. Compared with, for example, Japanese expatriate managers in Malaysia who sought close relations with local community to uphold worker's social obligations,[318] the Chinese managers of Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd, with their rule-oriented governance approach, rarely attempted to engage with local community to control workers' conduct, and discipline of workers was instead reinforced primarily through different forms of formalistic coercion.

Many scholars have argued that in the Chinese social context, '*guanxi*' is an important strategy to promote harmony and avoid conflict. This common conception that Chinese harmony is maintained through building relationships, however, does not offer a nuanced view. In his study comparing the conceptions of harmony between Chinese and Africans, Metz argues that the Chinese do not see sense of togetherness and egalitarianism as essential for harmony, instead harmony can emerge from highly unequal relationships if 'parties with somewhat antagonistic attitudes were organised appropriately.' In this factory, with the Burmese workers having their own interest concerns organised around a system of strict rules and hierarchy, workplace harmony was thought to have been achieved — probably more like a superficial form of harmony that the workers instrumentally avoided disintegration in fear of the negative consequences.[319]

3.2 Burmese Approach of the 'Human Dimension'

[318] Ong and Freeman (n 70).
[319] Leung and others (n 96).

Working under the Chinese managers who imposed a lot of rules to be followed, the Burmese workers generally showed a rather compliant attitude. I did notice minor and rather trivial rule-deviant behaviour, for instance, there were empty bags of snacks in the shop floor where eating was prohibited, and mobile phones were used during work hours which again was prohibited. Other examples of rule-deviance include smoking cigarettes and eating betel nuts in the toilet. But overall, the 'laws' of this factory were followed at all sections and levels, and those with a history of rule-deviance comprise a very small minority.

At the receiving end of the 'systematic' governance method, few Burmese frontline workers openly express bad feelings about it. A few of them suggested that the rules were not that rigorous, and that they had previously worked in Chinese-run factories with more rigorous rules. They usually described themselves as rule-abiding and cooperative employees. Myo Chi Oo, a frontline worker from the cutting section even went as far to state, 'There's nothing we can't comply.' When asked to share their thoughts, frontline workers generally expressed the view that the existence and enforcement of rules was necessary, for example a frontline worker said:

> 'We have a lot of people here, and different people have different feelings, ideas, needs. Some are really well-behaved, but some are not, so I think there should be strict rules.'[320]

[320] Interview 15, Burmese worker (frontline).

For the Burmese supervisors, some of them internalised a rule-oriented approach, echoing aspects of the managerial philosophy of Chinese managers. For example, Phyoo Wai Htet, a junior supervisor, stated with a sense of pride:

> 'I obey the rules in the factory, and I persuade others to do the same. … Discipline is really good! With discipline, the factory can be run smoothly, workers can understand the rules, and things are done in a "systematic" manner.'[321]

Supervisors with this kind of mindset typically reproduced the behavioural and even linguistic patterns of Chinese managers in some way, particularly in relation to rules that impose discipline. When there was a deviation from the strictly defined rules, they readily criticised frontline workers and disciplined them. Frontline workers' complaints about the rules being 'too strict' were swiftly dismissed by the supervisors with comments like: 'Obey the rules or resign.'

However, compared with Chinese managers who favoured the exhaustive use of formal rules and procedures to run the factory, the Burmese workers exhibited some differences in their attitude. Although they generally agreed that rules are necessary to maintain order, their vision of rules does not emphasise the strict and systematic aspects, as they expected a human dimension to the rules with room for situation-adjusted discretion. A frontline worker, for example, said that the workers would not

[321] Interview 24, Burmese worker (junior supervisor).

be able to 'work happily and focus on the job well' if the rules were too restrictive. Some frontline workers acknowledged they might voice out in face of rules that they considered unreasonably strict. 'Strict rules may not fit me, so we have to negotiate for rules that suit us,' said Htay Than Than, a Burmese worker at the sewing section, 'If the environment is bad, we need to change the rules.' Therefore, the 'laws' of this factory — the system of rules and procedures established for workplace order — may not always represent fairness and objectivity to the Burmese staff, and that their obedience to the 'law,' to a certain extent, was a moral choice taking into consideration general happiness and wellbeing.

I have anticipated that in respect of rules, the Burmese frontline workers would not align themselves completely with the management, since they were the ones subject to the authority of the rules. What was interesting, though, was the attitude shown by the Burmese supervisors. Even as partial rule enforcers themselves, some supervisors were unhappy about the human dimension being taken out of the rules. In studies about rule-breaking in organisations, researchers have suggested that supervisors sometimes condone or even encourage deviation from clearly stated company rules, and they can apply double standards to excuse themselves from rule-breaking.[322] Indeed, some Burmese supervisors in the factory, unhappy with the rigorous rules, were not hesitant to become rule-breakers themselves to secure some enjoyment. San Myint Myint, a junior supervisor, said she felt unhappy about the rule prohibiting

[322] Mike Webb and Gerry Palmer, 'Evading Surveillance and Making Time: An Ethnographic View of the Japanese Factory Floor in Britain' (1998) 36 British Journal of Industrial Relations 611; Peter Mascini, 'The Blameworthiness of Health and Safety Rule Violations' (2005) 27 Law and Policy 472.

workers from having snacks, so when she was hungry, she simply ignored the rule and grabbed some snacks. Htet Lin Wai, another junior supervisor, said she only abided by the rules 'sometimes.' Despite a rule banning mobile phones during work hours, when she felt bored from work she would take out her phone and play games.

There is a common thread running through much of the literature that rule-breaking is understood as resistance, misbehaviour, and dissent, in that they are portrayed as taking place in contexts of asymmetry of power.[323] But as argued by Kirke, a more nuanced view of rule-breaking would see it as more than disobedience *per se*, but as a culturally-informed set of actions constituting the unofficial dimension to organisational life.[324] After observing and chatting with the Burmese workers, I learnt that they strategically refrained from entirely positioning themselves within the Chinese managers' narrative of strict rule-following, and instead, embraced positions within their own concepts of happiness, agency, and individualisation. The incident to be discussed below will illustrate how with these concepts, the Burmese workers created opportunities to counter dominant norms and perspectives in the workplace, and at the same time, flexibly constructed self-identities to affirm their individual autonomy and maintain harmony of their relationships.

The Burmese worker involved in this incident, Myo Win, was a staff at the information technology team of the administrative section, responsible for maintaining computer

[323] Charles Kirke, 'Orders Is Orders … Aren't They? Rule Bending and Rule Breaking in the British Army' (2010) 11 Ethnography 359.
[324] ibid.

hardware, software, and key factory internal data such as attendance, inventory, and accounting records. One day, he personally received a request from the Burmese-Chinese interpreter to alter the factory attendance record, and without much hesitation, he complied with the request:

> 'I was using the computer to check workers' schedules. That morning, the interpreter wasn't there, but he still wanted his salary, so he called me and asked me to mark him as present. I did as he told me.'[325]

Shortly, after checking the attendance and salary records, the Chinese manager discovered what Myo Win did. He immediately summoned Myo Win together with the said interpreter and confronted them:

> 'Once he found out there was something wrong, he told me to fix it. He asked, "Why did you give him the money while he wasn't there? What were you thinking? He wasn't working at all." I got a warning for that.'[326]

The interpreter involved in Myo Win's story was not given the official title of 'supervisor,' and was not assigned to any particular section of the factory, hence it would be difficult to consider the interpreter an immediate supervisor of Myo Win. Like other interpreters, he translated and delivered instructions made by Chinese

[325] Interview 39, Burmese worker (frontline).
[326] Interview 39, Burmese worker (frontline).

managers. Even if this interpreter was assigned role as the immediate 'supervisor' of Myo Win, as with other supervisors, his decision-making power would be limited to giving out instructions concerning minor and routine tasks. With months of experience in a workplace structured in hierarchy of reporting relationships, Myo Win likely knew that any alteration of attendance records — classified information about the factory's internal management of production and resources — must be made known to the Chinese managers, and prior permission must certainly be obtained. Still, Myo Win ignored the chain of command procedures and broke the factory rules.

Why did Myo Win take the liberty to alter the records without receiving approval from Chinese managers? When I asked for more details, I learnt that the said interpreter told Myo Win 'It's okay' and promised to inform the Chinese manager about this whole thing. With this promise in mind, and his belief in the perceived power of the interpreter, Myo Win felt justified to perform the alteration:

> 'The interpreters and "*siya*" work together, they know each other so well. The interpreters are also powerful, they're working under the "*siya*," so they're the second most powerful people in the factory. I thought he would keep the promise.'[327]

In the end, it turned out that the said interpreter did not inform the Chinese manager, and Myo Win was rebuked and punished, after the Chinese manager discovered the

[327] Interview 39, Burmese worker (frontline).

'unauthorised' alteration. Myo Win naturally felt bad about his treatment, yet intriguingly, when I asked about his thoughts on this incident, he did not think registering a fake attendance record was a wrong act of rule-breaking. The 'mistake' that he made, as perceived by him, was that he wrongly valued the relationship thus placed trust on the interpreter to fulfil the promise. Myo Win's decision to alter the records was not guided by a prioritisation of workplace accountability procedures and rules, and neither did he take into serious consideration it was his responsibility to ensure integrity of the records, and that manipulating them could be conceived as a serious fraud upon the factory. When told off by the Chinese manager in the presence of the said interpreter, he defended himself by claiming it was the interpreter's fault, and he expected the interpreter to inform the Chinese manager and tell the truth as promised.

Myo Win's interpretation of the incident provides insight into his instinctive perception of workplace order and illustrates his focus on the network of relations and personal agreements in making sense of workplace governance. The way he acted appears to be a manifestation of behaviour and values common in the dynamics of relation-based governance, in contrast to Chinese managers' preference for more rule-based or formalistic style of governance. In Myo Win's mind, when deciding whether to comply with interpreter's request to manipulate attendance records, the inclination to adhere to factory rules and proper chain of command procedures was eventually outweighed by the importance he attached to his private agreement with the interpreter.

The interpreter's perceived informal power at the workplace was an important factor contributing to Myo Win's decision. Despite not having been granted an official 'supervisor' title in the hierarchical order, the interpreter, by working closely with the Chinese managers, was perceived by Myo Win and possibly other workers to possess great deal of informal power and with the justifiable right to exert influence over the work environment via their Chinese language and cross-cultural expertise.[328] While researchers have suggested the more power we possess, the less we are associated with justice towards others,[329] Myo Win's relation-based tendency might have led him to frame perception of trustworthiness based on social networks and interpersonal communication.[330] His trust in and desire to maintain relationship with the interpreter was strong enough to make him prioritise the informal agreement and ignore Chinese managers' expectation for him to obey the rules and hierarchy procedures.

To sum up this section, both China and Myanmar are commonly classified as 'relational' and 'collectivistic' cultures, but as the incident involving Myo Win illustrates, subtle differences between the two groups can potentially lead to problems.

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[328] The critical and complicated role of the Chinese-Burmese interpreters will be further discussed in the coming chapters.

[329] Alison R Fragale, Jennifer R Overbeck and Margaret A Neale, 'Resources versus Respect: Social Judgments Based on Targets' Power and Status Positions' (2011) 47 Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 767; Steven L Blader and Ya Ru Chen, 'Differentiating the Effects of Status and Power: A Justice Perspective' (2012) 102 Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 994.

[330] See the arguments in Sandra Simas Graca, Patricia M Doney and James M Barry, 'An Institutional View of the Communication Flows between Relation-Based and Rule-Based Countries' (2017) 12 International Journal of Emerging Markets 79; Roger C Mayer, James H Davis and F David Schoorman, 'An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust' (1995) 20 Academy of Management Review 709; Yoon Jik Cho and Jung Wook Lee, 'Perceived Trustworthiness of Supervisors, Employee Satisfaction and Cooperation' (2011) 13 Public Management Review 941.

The 'systematic management' approach of the Chinese managers gives primacy to rules and procedures, thus creating an impersonalised work relationship with their staff. The Burmese workers, juxtaposed with the Chinese managers, also expected relationships to be based on strict rules devised by their 'authoritative teachers,' in which case they would obey willingly, but there was the tendency to treat rules with a more casual and relation-focused approach. Influenced by their concern for wellbeing, there was, among the Burmese, expectation of mutual responsibility to bring happiness and harmony to others and to the collective. Hence, rules and regulations should be created according to what needs to be done and enforced in a way that facilitates the community. Otherwise, the 'what ought to be done' kind of rules may be perceived by the Burmese workers as an unnecessary boundary that compromises harmony and freedom.[331]

Although Chinese enterprises in their business arrangements tend to value informal relationships, look upon substance rather than form, and regard agreements as mere symbols of collaboration,[332] my study of the site offers a more nuanced understanding of rule-oriented governance in a Chinese-run work environment. This rule orientation might have been the result of modern capitalist production, of which shop floors are typically marked by circumscribed and regularised coercion, with infliction of

[331] See the discussion about Buddhist influence on Burmese people's attitude toward rules: HRN Peiris, 'The Buddhist Approach on Rules and Regulations - Using as a Motivation Factor', (Proceedings of International Conference on Humanities and Social Sciences, Nugegoda, 2012).
[332] Mingqiang Hou, 'A Discussion on the Legal and Ethical Challenges for Chinese Overseas Investment: Risks, Contributors, and Measures' (2015) 8 Journal of International Business Ethics 66; Stanley B Lubman, 'Investment and Export Contracts in the People's Republic of China: Perspectives on Evolving Patterns' (1988) 3 Brigham Young University Law Review 543; Duran Bell, 'Guanxi: A Nesting of Groups' (2000) 41 Current Anthropology 132.

discipline and punishment becoming the object of consent.[333] This tendency might have also been influenced by the values of Legalism, a traditional Chinese philosophical thought advocating centralised leadership with a clear power structure and enforcing objective, consistent, and enforceable rules.[334] Still, just as there is a hardly a completely 'individualistic' or 'collectivistic' culture, there is hardly a culture that is completely 'rule-oriented' or 'relation-oriented.' Considering a range of variables, in particular relational and situational variables, allows us to enhance our ability to explore and understand the governance behaviour of Chinese managers in different circumstances, particularly in socio-cultural contexts that are foreign to Chinese people.

4. Conclusion

There is a common perception that China and Myanmar are both Eastern and 'collectivistic' cultures, but as I have discussed in this chapter, the Chinese expatriate managers and Burmese workers at the factory had different perspectives about what leadership and governance should look like. Thinking it would be in the best interest of the factory to have a strong and powerful figure, the Chinese managers ran the place like a cold, strict parent. They employed rigid systems of governance and formalistic rules, and they treated their Burmese staff like children by delegating only simple tasks to them and exerting absolute control over the workplace. Generally, they

[333] Burawoy, 'Between the Labor Process and the State: The Changing Face of Factory Regimes Under Advanced Capitalism' (n 51).
[334] Chen and Lee (n 277).

displayed little sense of attachment or care for the wellbeing of their staff, and exhibited little affection and concern for their well-being.

Scholars researching Chinese investments in other parts of the world, such as Africa for example, have noticed how African workers expect managers to be dominant figures who would provide advice, guidance, and material benefits in the form of transportation subsidies or pocket money to demonstrate their protector value.[335] In contrast, the Burmese workers in this factory rarely requested material benefits. Distinctively, they expected leaders to demonstrate guardianship qualities, not simply through material provision, but through taking a 'humanistic' and relation-based approach to protect happiness and harmony. In their normative perception, happiness and personal relationships should take precedence over formalistic rules and procedures. While they had no issue with an autocratic leader, nor did they desire to have a stronger voice, their ideal leader is a warm, kind, authoritative teacher who places high value on connecting with his or her staff.

[335] Giese (n 12); Wu (n 12).

CHAPTER SIX – CONTRASTING MODELS OF SOCIAL ORDER

The present chapter examines the model of social order favoured by Chinese managers, which was expressed in a three-tier hierarchical management system, with formalised work arrangements, and a focus on leader-follower distance and differential treatment between Burmese workers. The description of the daily activities of the Burmese workers is followed by an analysis of how they appear to be used to a different social order, that although hierarchical relationships were a part of their normative understanding, the Burmese workers expected to find greater happiness and flexibility within the social order. In addition, I examine the connections between ideas of social order and socio-cultural reality in order to demonstrate how context influences the lived experience of members in the factory, particularly the frictions resulting from contrasting expectations about hierarchy in the workplace.

1. Importance of Distance in Chinese Version of Social Order

As I have discussed in the previous chapters, in Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd, a three-tier hierarchical system was implemented by the Chinese management to maximise the factory's productivity and efficiency. The system operated through a designedly strict chain of command. Situated at the top of the hierarchy were the Chinese managers, at a level below were the Burmese supervisors, and situated at the bottom were the frontline Burmese workers. Typically, instructions were 'cascaded' from the

top to the bottom, and the frontline staff should report only to their immediate supervisors. This hierarchical management system, paralleled by an ethnicity-ordered division of labour, was a defining characteristic of this Chinese-run cross-cultural work environment, and its actual operation was much influenced and complicated by the different expectations held by the participating parties.

Having established the hierarchical management system, the Chinese managers were quite insistent that every factory staff should follow the line of communication and reporting system created based on the command hierarchy. It was uncommon for Chinese managers to interact with frontline Burmese workers in the absence of an intermediary. They expected frontline staff to report their problems to the immediate supervisors. Only for some exceptions such as emergency or complicated technical problems that the frontline staff might report to the Chinese managers directly for them to quickly step in and solve the issue. Failure of Burmese workers in observing the procedures, like not reporting matters to the 'right person,' was conceived as a problem that required correction. For example, a mechanics section Chinese manager complained that:

> 'Although they've worked here for a while, they don't have this mindset about hierarchical relationships. That's why I feel frustrated sometimes. It's up to me to indoctrinate the people here, to train them

in our way of doing things. Like when my staff wants leave, they just ask me. I stop them and tell them to talk to their supervisor instead.'[336]

To the Chinese managers, this hierarchical system based on a strict chain of command was the foundation of workplace order in the factory. Every staff, upon starting their position, was obliged to learn the 'rituals' of hierarchical accountability and develop the habit of seeking permission from and reporting to their immediate superior. Therefore, tension might occur when the frontline staff, whether on purpose or not, circumvent the supervisors and take matters up to the Chinese manager directly. Being strong believers in the system that they have established, the Chinese managers would not tolerate deviance or turn a blind eye. They often requested their staff to adhere to the procedures and avoid breaking the organisational norm.

Above formalised work arrangements, it is noteworthy that the Chinese managers expressed a strong habitual tendency to emphasis leader-follower distance, specifically physical distance and differential treatment, as the means to uphold the hierarchical order. For example, Chinese managers rarely had casual conversations with the Burmese workers during work hours, including lunchbreaks, and rarely did they have meals together. Even for the few off-hours social activities of dinners and karaoke sessions between them and the Burmese supervisors, I noticed that the two groups barely mingled, as the Chinese managers chatted happily among themselves and sang Chinese language songs. The social activities organised by Chinese

[336] Interview 53, Chinese manager.

managers were more like gestures of kindness to show appreciation for the work of the Burmese supervisors, rather than to build more personal relationship with them. Not much attempt had been made by them to seek assistance from interpreters to facilitate chats with the Burmese workers. It appears, therefore, that both inside and outside the workplace, Chinese managers were deliberately trying to maintain a distance from their Burmese staff.

According to the Chinese managers, leader-follower distance and differential treatment were the essential components of their 'systematic management.' Chinese managers often compared this factory with the garment factories in China, and they expressed liking for the latter's practices which they thought were 'done in a very systematic manner.' As explained by a Chinese manager of the mechanics section, factories in China divided managers into junior and senior grades, and at different grades, the managers were entitled to different benefits. Compared with junior managers, senior managers enjoyed better food in a separate canteen, and better accommodation in a separate facility requiring access card at the entrance and heavily guarded by security personnel. Some Chinese managers were therefore unhappy with the arrangement in this factory, complaining that they were having the same type of food and living in the same accommodation together with the Chinese-Burmese interpreters, who they considered were 'below them' in the workplace hierarchy.

When asked about the reason for preferring this segregation by job title, the Chinese managers discussed that 'generous benefits' provided to staff higher up in the

hierarchy would serve as an important incentive for workers to try harder, compete with each other, and ultimately improve job performance. As a Chinese manager explained in his own words during my casual chat with him:

> 'If they see that some people get such special treatment, they'll be jealous. They'll work hard so someday they'll be promoted and get special treatment.'

Nonetheless, it does not appear to me that the Chinese managers had considered whether this hierarchy-based incentive scheme would work in Burmese society, either for cultural or pragmatic reasons. In the following subsections, rather than presenting Chinese managers with typical labels like 'collectivist' or 'high power distance,' I analyse in detail the principles of hierarchical order adopted by them as the reflection of socio-cultural perspectives.

1.1 Segregation Practices in Chinese Factories

The managerial practices applied by Chinese managers in Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd might have been influenced significantly by their work experience in the factories in China. Since the early 1980s, the Chinese communist government began to liberalise China's economy. It gradually withdrew support for state enterprises and socialist welfare paternalism, and instead, facilitated the development of a foreign investment driven private sector by significantly enhancing autonomy for 'scientific' and 'market-

oriented' forms of management.[337] As a result, the Chinese state departments, including the Labour Bureau, significantly reduced their role in monitoring labour conditions and management practices in foreign-invested factories.[338] Typical of early capitalism everywhere, the unfettered managerial power enabled investors to adopt managerial strategies and methods of labour discipline that would maximise productivity and maintain workplace order, as they joined the pursuit for cheap costs and products to compete with other global suppliers of consumer goods.[339]

Taking advantage of Chinese government's lax regulatory approach and adopting 'race-to-the-bottom' production strategies to exploit the country's cheap labour, investors in China created factory regimes with rather despotic management styles and coercive disciplinary methods where management-labour relationship was structured in a rigidly hierarchical manner.[340] Centralised decision-making and command-and-control approach prohibited delegation of authority to production line workers in a labour-intensive factories.[341] Lack of state support and absence of independent trade unions meant it was extremely difficult to implement any meaningful forms of worker representation.[342] Compared with working in socialist

[337] Ching Kwan Lee, 'From Organized Dependence to Disorganized Despotism : Changing Labour Regimes in Chinese Factories' (1999) 157 The China Quarterly 44.
[338] Ngai (n 257).
[339] Kim (n 1).
[340] See for example, Hong Xue,'Local Strategies of Labor Control: A Case Study of Three Electronics Factories in China'(2008) 73 International Labor and Working-Class History 85; Ngai Pun and Xiaomin Yu, 'When Wal-Mart and the Chinese Dormitory Labour Regime Meet: A Study of Three Toy Factories in China' (2008) 1 China Journal of Social Work 110; Chan and Zhu (n 252).
[341] Garrett D Brown and Dara O'Rourke, 'Lean Manufacturing Comes to China: A Case Study of Its Impact on Workplace Health and Safety' (2007) 13 International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health 249.
[342] See Ruixue Bai, 'The Role of the All China Federation of Trade Unions: Implications for Chinese Workers Today' (2011) 14 WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labor and Society 19. In China, trade unions find themselves in a conflicting and even contradicting position, since they need to resolve labour

state enterprises,[343] the Chinese workers reported a decline in status, tough disciplinary measures, and discriminatory welfare policy, as such exploitative management practice became popular in China's privately-owned factories.

In their study of labour regimes in China, Chan and Zhu exposed the militaristic management of Chinese factories and refuted the culturalist claim of benignly Confucian Chinese management-labour relations.[344] This serves as a reminder to us that 'culture' does not mean 'ethnic,' and it is simplistic to pass judgment on 'culture' as a static set of ideas. If we understand culture as an established and learned pattern of relationship in a particular time and place, we can recognise how the cultural patterns of Chinese managers in Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd were partly the product of their work experiences in private-owned Chinese factories. As workers, they learnt the managerial practices and internalised the values of capitalist production, and eventually as managers themselves, they developed their own managerial approach, and the approach was eventually transplanted directly from China to Myanmar after they were hired as managers of this factory.

Having applied a similar management approach in both China and Myanmar, there was a tendency for the Chinese managers to contrast the performance of workers in

disputes, yet they remain part of the state apparatus and their role cannot be at odds with state interest. The government-controlled All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) is China's sole legally-permissible trade union. Rather than putting workers' interests and rights first, the ACFTU, as an organ of the ruling Chinese Communist Party, has shifted its agenda in line with that of the Party, which has often meant prioritising interests of business over those of the workers.

[343] Wenfang Tang, William L Parish and Tongqing Feng, 'Chinese Labor Relations in a Changing Work Environment' (1996) 5 Journal of Contemporary China 367.

[344] Chan and Zhu (n 252).

these two cultures. I noticed it was common for them to use Chinese workers as a point of comparison to criticise Burmese workers. For example, after describing how 'diligent' and 'productive' the Chinese workers were, a Chinese manager said to me in a frustrated tone that he had to 'understand the Burmese people,' 'lower his expectations,' and 'get used to things,' in order to not feel disappointed at the Burmese workers. He perceived the Chinese workers to be better, not only in terms of 'individual ability,' but they had 'formed their personal view from experience' that sometimes they could even come up with their own work method as an improvement on the method taught to them. The mechanics section Chinese manager, elaborating this point, described how the Chinese workers were able to express a 'respectful' attitude towards workplace hierarchy arrangements, while coming up with new ideas and expressing them:

> 'If they came up with a method, they would ask me if I thought it was correct. First thing was that they would do it respectfully. They were very clear about the hierarchy. "He's my supervisor, I'll ask him first, raise the concern to him first, if the problem still doesn't get fixed, the supervisor will talk to people higher up in the organisation. If that doesn't solve it, it's referred to people higher up." They don't bypass the immediate supervisor. They know it'll get them in trouble.'[345]

[345] Interview 53, Chinese manager.

From the Chinese manager's recollection of his experience with Chinese workers, it appears that compared with Burmese workers, Chinese workers generally had a stronger regard for hierarchy and followed closely the hierarchy-related workplace norms. There is research that supports this view and suggests this hierarchy-oriented attitude may even extend to relations in the virtual world. According to Tian's research on Chinese workers' use of WeChat, a Chinese messaging and social media app, Chinese employees remain very aware of the power hierarchy when expressing appreciation for their superiors via WeChat. For example, they are cautious when flattering senior members by writing comments on their posts because they do not wish to be seen by their immediate supervisors as circumventing the chain of command, and they are reluctant to post comments before their immediate supervisor has responded.[346] Organisational dynamics in Chinese workplaces, therefore, is marked by a high degree of rigidity, such that behaviour circumventing the chain of command, especially by junior level employees, is perceived as undesirable and unacceptable workplace deviance.

The 'segregation' arrangement which Chinese managers personally experienced and expressed a liking for is actually a common practice in foreign-invested factories in China. For example, Won have reported how Korean-run factories in China adopted a clear segregation of offices, shop floors, canteens, and living arrangements according to the hierarchical order of ethnicity and class, with Korean managers situated at the

[346] Xiaoli Tian, 'An Interactional Space of Permanent Observability: WeChat and Reinforcing the Power Hierarchy in Chinese Workplaces' (2021) 36 Sociological Forum 51.

top, followed by Korean-Chinese, then Chinese workers at the bottom.[347] This hierarchical segregation, serving to distinguish those in higher positions from those lower through living, working, and eating in separate spaces, was justified by Korean expatriate managers as a 'learning process' for Chinese workers to practise 'class hierarchy' and become 'self-motivated' at capitalist factories, since the Chinese workers 'lacked initiative' as they were 'used to the practice of socialism where there was no necessary linkage between efforts and rewards.'[348] Although this is based on old-fashioned stereotypes, it is intriguing and rather ironic that the Chinese managers in this factory had provided a similar reason of capitalistic motivation in support of the implementation of 'segregation' practices.

Nowadays, segregation is a common practice in Chinese-run enterprises overseas. Ding Fei's study of Chinese construction projects in Ethiopia, for example, describes how Chinese expatriate managers and workers were housed in enclosed residential space segregated from the local Africans.[349] Even among the Chinese there, there was clear segregation and differential treatment. Brick wall partitioned the site and segregated contractors and subcontractors, as each party operated their own canteens and accommodations. Managers had separate meals prepared for them in a small dining room and stayed in single-bed rooms, while workers shared a room with four to eight bunk beds and had meals in an open canteen space. Ding Fei describes this

[347] Jaeyoun Won, 'Post-Socialist China: Labour Relations in Korean-Managed Factories' (2007) 37 Journal of Contemporary Asia 309.
[348] ibid.
[349] Ding Fei, 'Geoforum The Compound Labor Regime of Chinese Construction Projects in Ethiopia' (2020) 117 Geoforum 13.

special segregation as being 'intimately entangled with the broader political, economic, and social forces at transnational and national levels as well as the locality-specific relationships of power.'[350]

China's past decades of reforms have witnessed the widespread adoption of capitalist labour practices in the manufacturing industry.[351] It would be wrong to suggest there was no linkage between efforts and rewards in pre-reform China, but the extensive use of material incentives linking job performance with individual benefits indeed became popular after economic liberalisation. Market-oriented reforms prompted China to abandon its socialist manner of production in favour of industrial capitalism and its work ethics. It is hard to tell, from the words of the Chinese managers in this factory, whether they genuinely thought that this 'segregation' arrangement could boost productivity. What is apparent, though, is that they had internalised the values of industrial capitalism, such that in the name of providing material incentives, they wanted to encourage inequalities to occur between individual factory staff. Even though their desired arrangement of 'segregation' by job title was yet to be implemented in this factory, as managers of a foreign-invested enterprise in Myanmar, they were prepared to reproduce the practice in Chinese factories to impose a hierarchical 'segregation' system on the local Burmese workers.

1.2 Traditional Ideas of Social Relationships in China

[350] ibid.
[351] Mary E Gallagher, '"Time Is Money, Efficiency Is Life": The Transformation of Labor Relations in China' (2004) 39 Studies in Comparative International Development 11.

Setting aside the implications of China's relatively recent history of industrialisation, traditional Chinese ideas of social relationships are likely to be another determinant of Chinese managers' hierarchy-oriented management approach. Confucianism, the classical Chinese philosophical system, has been the predominant influence on Chinese culture for centuries. Although most Chinese people are not religious and one should avoid imposing crude stereotypes on them, the influence of Confucian culture on the way traditional Chinese social structure and order was organised cannot be ignored either. In the background of the immense changes in the era of globalisation, traces of worldviews prevalent in traditional China continue to impact multiple aspects of China in the present day.

Traditional Confucian values regard the preservation of hierarchical relationships as the foundation of an orderly society. Everyone should know their position and follow a code of ethics based on the 'Five Relationships,' characterised by asymmetry or a degree of superordination and subordination.[352] Power of the individual stems largely from his or her position within social hierarchy, and self-identity is inseparable from its placement within the social network.[353] The nature of human relationship is assumed to be unequal and complementary, such that 'juniors' are expected to owe 'seniors' respect and obedience, and 'seniors' in return should provide 'juniors' with

[352] Fred Dallmayr, 'Confucianism and the Public Sphere: Five Relationships plus One?' (2003) 2 Dao 193.

[353] Hans Georg Moeller, 'New Confucianism and the Semantics of Individuality. A Luhmannian Analysis' (2004) 14 Asian Philosophy 25; Jiing Lih Farh, Rick D Hackett and Jian Liang, 'Individual-Level Cultural Values as Moderators of Perceived Organizational Support-Employee Outcome Relationships in China: Comparing the Effects of Power Distance and Traditionality' (2007) 50 Academy of Management Journal 715.

guidance and protection.[354] This 'senior' authority morphs as authoritarianism to govern most aspects of social relationships.[355] Therefore, as described by Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong, social relationships in traditional China were heavily structured by hierarchical distinctions.[356] Through the process of socialisation, the content of such distinctions is defined and maintained by social norms, rituals, and customs,[357] as the vertical and hierarchical nature of social structure is upheld, and the hierarchical distinctions between 'seniors' and 'juniors' is emphasised. Taking precedence over any form of individuality, the content of hierarchical distinctions defines a person's identity together with his or her rights and responsibilities in relationships, and as well legitimates the imbalance of rights and responsibilities attached to 'seniors' and 'juniors' of the hierarchy. A role-based order, premised on hierarchical arrangements, is believed to provide an organised collective that is both productive and harmonious.

While it is true that China has undergone tremendous changes since economic liberalisation, therefore traditional hierarchy and patriarchal practices might have lost

[354] Guo Ming Chen and Jensen Chung, 'The Impact of Confucianism on Organizational Communication' (1994) 42 Communication Quarterly 93.
[355] Po Keung Ip, 'Is Confucianism Good for Business Ethics in China?' (2009) 88 Journal of Business Ethics 463.
[356] Carsten Herrmann-Pillath, 'Fei Xiaotong's Comparative Theory of Chinese Culture: Its Relevance for Contemporary Cross-Disciplinary Research on Chinese "Collectivism"' (2016) 34 Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies 25; Xiaotong Fei, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society* (University of California Press 1992). Fei Xiaotong used the term '*chaxugeju*' to describe the mode of social structure in traditional China. There are a few translations for the phrase, such as 'differential mode of association' and 'differential pattern.' I adopt neither of these translations and decide to translate the phrase word by word. '*Cha*' means difference and distinction, '*xu*' means rank and order, and '*geju*' means pattern.
[357] Yunxiang Yan, '"Chaxu Geju" and the Notion of Hierarchy in Chinese Culture' (2006) 4 Sociological Studies 201.

their appeal among the younger generation in big cities,[358] Confucian-influenced morals still exert powerful influence on the way Chinese people cultivate themselves in interpersonal relationships.[359] As the Chinese managers of this factory adapted their values to the circumstances they faced in Myanmar, their cognitive and behavioural patterns instantiated a schema emphasising autocratic control, obedience, and proper conduct in accordance with organisational status,[360] all of which bore comparison with the values of Confucian culture.

Reflecting traditional Chinese view of social relationships, Chinese managers perceived the nature of management-labour relations as fundamentally unequal. This perception could be revealed in the way they addressed themselves and amongst each other in Chinese, and also by the Chinese-Burmese interpreters and a handful of Burmese workers with some knowledge of Chinese words, as 'teacher-father' ('*shifu*'), rather than generic terms like 'manager,' 'supervisor,' or 'leader.' The term 'teacher-father' is a title in Chinese for a teacher or skilled tradesman, suggesting that in traditional belief, the teacher-student relationship is modelled after the father-son relationship and is marked by its imperative nature of being pervasive, stringent, and intolerant of deviation.[361] Self-perceived as 'fathers' of the relationship, the Chinese

[358] Guy Olivier Faure, 'Chinese Society and Its New Emerging Culture' (2008) 17 Journal of Contemporary China 469.
[359] Ruiping Fan, *The Renaissance of Confucianism in Contemporary China* (Springer 2011).
[360] Henry Suen, Sai On Cheung and Reuben Mondejar, 'Managing Ethical Behaviour in Construction Organizations in Asia: How Do the Teachings of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism and Globalization Influence Ethics Management?' (2007) 25 International Journal of Project Management 257.
[361] David Yau Fai Ho and Rainbow Tin Hung Ho, 'Knowledge Is a Dangerous Thing: Authority Relations, Ideological Conservatism, and Creativity in Confucian-Heritage Cultures' (2008) 38 Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour 67.

managers demanded unquestioning obedience from their 'sons,' the Burmese workers, leaving very little room for the workers to influence major decisions. As 'fathers' wanting to serve as example for their 'sons,' the Chinese managers regarded instructing and disciplining to be their primary responsibility, and their reliance on factory rules reflected the attempt to consolidate authority while simultaneously conveying the image of an impartial leader worthy of followers' genuine respect.

The influence of cultural values seems more apparent if we examine Chinese managers' relationship dynamics with the Hong Kong Chinese factory owner. Every time the factory owner visited the factory, the Chinese managers would behave courteously in front of him, like 'juniors' behaving 'respectfully' to their 'seniors.' During meetings, they would 'dutifully' report important issues, and only upon being asked by the factory owner would they raise their own suggestions. Whenever the factory owner intended to implement a new policy, the Chinese managers would nod their head and listen to the details attentively, even if they appeared to disagree with the impending change. Their conception of hierarchical practice is therefore not merely a tool used consciously to manage the workplace, but a cultural disposition learned through socialisation.

In short, building on unequal relationships, the orderly workplace according to the Chinese managers was structured by clearly defined hierarchical distinctions. The Chinese managers were strict about maintaining the chain of command and accountability, such that frontline Burmese workers were mandated to seek

permission from them before executing tasks, and not to break the chain of command by circumventing immediate supervisor to reach them directly. Apart from the chain of command distance, Chinese managers tried hard to maintain a physical and status distance from the Burmese workers. Their conversation with workers were limited, and concerned only work-related issues, and they generally refused to hang out with workers after work or have meals with them, except rare occasions with the supervisors. The arrangement of 'segregation' by job title could be explained not only as an incentive scheme, but also an effective mechanism to highlight the hierarchical distinctions and preserve workplace order.

2. Flexibility in Identities in Burmese Version of Social Order

Working under the hierarchical management system, the Burmese workers, more often than not, were aware of their responsibilities and they did not object to the rigid workplace hierarchy. Except some rare instances of them talking back to the supervisors and complaining about the factory rules being too strict, the frontline staff obeyed instructions of their superiors without much resentment. Their compliant, tolerant behaviour, as shown in the words of this frontline worker, is allegedly grounded in a reciprocal relationship based on the Burmese social context:

> 'We respect senior people in Burmese culture. Whether you're Chinese, Italian, or British, if you teach me something, I'll respect you, we show

respect by doing our jobs, and even if you do something bad to me, I'll tolerate it and treat you right.'[362]

With their perception of their superiors as 'seniors' entitled to respect and active tolerance, the frontline workers had little expectation to be consulted as 'colleagues' or even treated as 'equals'. To avoid appearing as a challenge to the authority of their 'seniors,' they tended to use more passive means to handle their own feelings of grievance. As for the supervisors, it appears that they actively exercised their role-derived authority to oversee production. They enforced the rules and disciplined rule-deviating workers. They monitored work progress and pushed frontline staff to work harder to meet the production targets designated by the Chinese managers. There were minor instances of which supervisors might be abusing their status, like according to some frontline workers, they might scream at frontline workers for no reason other than to relieve their stress.

Despite the appearance that Burmese supervisors were simply maintaining the hierarchy established by Chinese managers, I observed that they differed from Chinese managers in their attitude about hierarchical distance and distinctions. As I asked supervisors what they thought they deserved, many said they had been promoted due to their hard work, skills, and experience, but unlike Chinese managers, who would expect special treatment based on their position, Burmese supervisors did not seem to think they deserved anything more than a better salary.

[362] Interview 37, Burmese worker (junior supervisor).

Another significant difference can be seen in the relationship between Burmese supervisors and their subordinates. Chinese managers granted their Burmese subordinates — Burmese supervisors — exclusive 'rights' to communicate with them and attend Chinese-organised social functions, but still, the Burmese staff in this factory were strictly treated according to their status. One Chinese manager in the sewing section, for example, indicated that he would keep a leader-follower distance and avoid getting too personal with his staff, which is why he would never offer kind words to a worker after rebuking them:

> 'As a friend, I'll talk to them. As a manager, I won't. I scold you because you messed up. Then you're upset and you expect me to comfort you? No way! I can't manage this place if I do that.'[363]

To maintain the hierarchical distance between leaders and followers in this factory, the Chinese managers insisted that their relationship with the Burmese staff should remain task-oriented and aloof. In part because of this, one of the junior supervisors of the packing section suggested that despite working in the factory for a whole year, he still felt tense around Chinese managers and that outside of work hours, he would only interact with them in a polite manner.

[363] Interview 40, Chinese manager.

The Burmese supervisors, however, did not seem to appreciate and follow this kind of hierarchical practice. While they had to exercise authority as superiors, they tried to cultivate a warm relationship with their subordinates, and their mindset was very different from that of Chinese managers:

> 'I'm the organiser, I hang out with the workers, we explore, and visit places. When we work together, if I give something to the workers, they don't see me as a supervisor, they see me as a friend... We have conversations and work together happily.'[364]

The Burmese supervisors, who were expecting Chinese managers to be warm and authoritative teachers, desired to appear as friends to frontline workers, in contrast to Chinese managers who sought to maintain the leader-follower distance with subordinates over creating a warm, supportive, and friendly work environment. Even though the Burmese supervisors were assigned a 'superior' position in the hierarchy, they were determined to downplay the significance of hierarchical distinctions. As a result of different behavioural patterns concerning task management and communication, their ideas of hierarchy occasionally led to tensions at work.

In one of our discussions, a senior supervisor from the packing section mentioned a problem of such a nature. While working in the packing section for quite some time,

[364] Interview 58, Burmese worker (junior supervisor).

he noticed a consistent problem with the way things were done by the frontline workers:

> 'Quite often, the staff here don't ask permission from me or my "siya" before putting the finished garments on the truck and exporting them. They just do it.' [365]

In the factory hierarchy, Burmese workers as subordinates were expected to seek permission from Chinese managers before performing important tasks. All workers in the packing section were long-term workers, with an average of more than twelve to fifteen months of employment. At an early stage, Chinese managers likely taught them how to observe the workplace hierarchy policies, and they would have been familiar with the work procedures by that time. In failing to ask for permission frequently and consistently, the Burmese workers demonstrated that they were not following strictly the hierarchical system, and this seems to be a deliberate deviation rather than something that occurred by accident.

The workers might have been simply trying to conserve time and effort while juggling their demanding work schedules. They might prefer to bypass the chain of command and skip the step of obtaining management approval. As the Burmese supervisors were expected to be more independent and to handle things on their own, they may have thought it was appropriate to handle work independently without consulting

[365] Interview 20, Burmese worker (senior supervisor).

management. However, the bypassing of formal accountability structures, as illustrated by the previous examples, was a frequent occurrence, despite criticisms from Chinese management. Additionally, I noticed that this bypassing behaviour was not restricted to minor routine tasks. Even for important tasks, such as calculating and verifying the total shipping quantity, the frontline workers often failed to seek approval from Chinese managers before actually making the move:

> 'An employee once put 1,800 pieces of clothing on the truck to be shipped, but the order list actually called for 2,000... he didn't ask for permission and made a mistake. As part of shipping preparations, the staff should have checked the products and asked the "*siya*" for his permission.'[366]

How to make sense of the Burmese workers' tendency to bypass the command hierarchy? According to Wu, Tangirala, and Ramanujam, employees generally prefer addressing concerns to the immediate supervisor, unless they have a poor relationship with the supervisor, have a strong relationship with their senior leaders, or the supervisor does not have the capability to address the concern.[367] 'Leapfrogging' refers to employees' intentional act of bypassing their immediate supervisor to influence targets higher up in the hierarchy,[368] and as part of organisational politics,

[366] Interview 20, Burmese worker (senior supervisor).
[367] Wu Liu, Subrahmaniam Tangirala and Rangaraj Ramanujam, 'The Relational Antecedents of Voice Targeted at Different Leaders' (2013) 98 Journal of Applied Psychology 841.
[368] Sharon L Segrest and others, 'Leapfrogging at Work: Influencing Higher Levels in the Chain of Command' (2020) 49 Personnel Review 1769.

'leapfrogging' may occur when employees become frustrated by the denial of career-related resources from immediate supervisors and wish to 'leapfrog' to gain approval from senior members.[369] Bypassing of command channels, as observed by Kras, Portillo, and Taxman, may also be about 'answer-hopping,' which refers to employees seeking out assistance or advice from senior leader rather than from immediate superior, when employees receive answers they do not like or when have a problem they feel their immediate superior cannot resolve.[370] In either case, employees who disregard the chain of command demonstrate a lack of respect for the authority and influence of their immediate supervisor.[371]

Burmese workers' behaviour of bypassing the command chain, nonetheless, does not appear to resemble 'leapfrogging' or 'answer-hopping.' Apparently, the Burmese workers perceived their Chinese manager at the mechanics section to be far nicer than other managers, so it is possible that they intentionally requested leave from him. However, I observed no sign that the bypassing behaviour was meant to be a calculated and deliberate upward appeal to influence Chinese managers for maximising personal gains. In addition, there was no sign that bypassing behaviour was a manifestation of disrespectful and disobedient behaviour towards immediate supervisors, as the frontline workers were mostly obedient and very rarely demonstrated disobedience or refused to follow instructions.

[369] Martha C Andrews, LA Witt and K Michele Kacmar, 'The Interactive Effects of Organizational Politics and Exchange Ideology on Manager Ratings of Retention' (2003) 62 Journal of Vocational Behavior 357; Segrest and others (n 368).
[370] Kimberly R Kras, Shannon Portillo and Faye S Taxman, 'Managing from the Middle: Frontline Supervisors and Perceptions of Their Organizational Power' (2017) 39 Law and Policy 215.
[371] ibid.

I examine in the following sections the socio-cultural factors relevant to the hierarchy-related behaviour exhibited by the Burmese workers, as well as some frictions that resulted from the disparate attitudes and behaviours between the Chinese managers and Burmese workers within the factory.

2.1 Traditional Ideas of Social Relationships in Myanmar

Researchers such as Maung Maung Gyi and McCarthy have identified Myanmar as a 'law-of-status society,' which means the social order here is fundamentally hierarchical, and Burmese people tend to judge, value, and treat others in accordance with their social position.[372] Aung-Thwin argues this can be traced to traditional Burmese society when social order was organised in a strict and formal pyramidal scheme of class divisions.[373] His view can be contrasted with that of Lissak and McAuliff, who argue that British colonialism eliminated channels of mobility, such that after Myanmar's independence, the lower classes still do not have access to upward mobility.[374] As for the influence of the military junta, the imposition of

[372] McCarthy (n 195); Maung Maung Gyi, *Burmese Political Values: The Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarianism* (Praeger Publishers 1983).

[373] See Michael Aung-Thwin, 'Hierarchy and Order in Pre-Colonial Burma' (1984) 15 Journal of Southeast Asian Studies 224. According to Aung-Thwin, situated at the top was the royalty, their clearly definable kin and the higher (court) officialdom; below them were the lower (provincial) officialdom; and at the bottom lay the commoners, the bulk of Burmese society. Status in the hierarchy varied depending on the degree of one's distance from the ideal centre: kingship on the one hand and Buddhahood on the other.

[374] Moshe Lissak, 'The Class Structure of Burma: Continuity and Change' (1970) 1 ournal of Southeast Asian Studies 60; See also Erin L Mcauliffe, 'Caste and the Quest for Racial Hierarchy in British Burma: An Analysis of Census Classifications from 1872-1931' (University of Washington 2017). Theories of racial hierarchy developed in Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries, with the attempt to attribute every individual to a racial group to complement notions of 'superiority' and 'inferiority.' During Myanmar's colonial rule, the British navigated religious and linguistic differences and used these characteristics to

decades of military rule is said to have fostered and reinforced values of respect, hierarchy, and discipline among people.[375] Scholars provide differing interpretations of Myanmar's history in their analyses, but reviewing the history of Myanmar can help put current observations about the hierarchy-related behaviour of Burmese in context.

Because Myanmar is primarily a Buddhist nation, the integrating cultural influence of Buddhism is undeniably a significant factor to consider. There is a saying in Myanmar which goes: 'To be a Burmese is to be a Buddhist.'[376] Central to the Buddhist conception of human relationships is the law of '*karma*,' a religious doctrine maintaining that life is cyclical — a process of birth, death, and rebirth — and all actions are cumulative, with consequences manifested in this life or next according to the character of the actions performed.[377] The law of *'karma'* implies that there is a natural hierarchy within which everyone is born unequally into the social position he or she deserves,[378] and the social organisations, power relations, and all inequalities are explained and justified by the differences in merit determined by '*karma*.'[379] That being so, it is widely accepted in Burmese society that some people are naturally

erect racial boundaries. The racial groups were intended to indicate the origin of an individual, and more importantly, his/her position among a fixed social hierarchy.

[375] Barbara Geddes, Erica Frantz and Joseph G Wright, 'Military Rule' (2014) 17 Annual Review of Political Science 147; Donald Seekins, '"Runaway Chickens" and Myanmar Identity Relocating Burma's Capital' (2009) 13 City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action 63.

[376] See Pau Lian Mang, 'The Mis/Appropriation of Buddhist Hierarchy in Myanmar: A Christian Perspective' (2016) 1 QUEST: Studies on Religion & Culture in Asia 54. This saying is subject to criticism because not all Burmese people are Buddhists. For example, the Kachin people, an ethnic minority group in northern Myanmar, are predominantly Christians.

[377] Bruce R Reichenbach, *The Law of Karma: A Philosophical Study* (Macmillan Publishing 1990); David Gilbert, 'Categorizing Gender in Queer Yangon' (2013) 28 Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia 241.

[378] Jessica Harriden, *The Authority of Influence: Women and Power in Burmese History* (NIAS Press 2012).

[379] Melford E Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes B* (University of California Press 1982).

ranked higher in the social hierarchy. In Buddhist teachings, there are ten kinds of Great Benefactors (*'khinpoongyi'*) who should be held in high regard,[380] for example Buddhist monks are revered for their perceived authority, wisdom, and religiosity.[381] It is social custom for people to show gratitude and respect to *'khinpoongyi'*, and those who do this 'good deed' will receive merit in their present and next life.[382]

With gratitude being another central component of Buddhism, the status differences deriving from *'karmic'* merit are often cast in terms of debt and obligation, as social relationships are said to be sustained by reciprocal transactions of gratitude and good will.[383] 'Seniors' are expected to maintain their position through displaying good morals and making valued contributions like showing care, knowledge, and competence,[384] and in return, responsibility of 'juniors' to show respect to 'seniors' arises from a sense of gratitude and a feeling of indebtedness. Familial relationships, for example, are construed in this manner. As written by Thingazar Sayædaw, a renowned ancient Burmese scholar, parents as 'seniors' must restrain their children from evil, encourage them to do good, give them education and training,[385] and in return for the care and kindness, children as 'juniors' must obey their parents.[386] In a

[380] See Lay Nwe, 'The Concept of Gratitude in Myanmar Ethical Thought' (2011) 4 Universities Research Journal 1. According to Buddhist teachings, there are ten Great Benefactors. They are (l) Buddha; (2) personal Enlightened One; (3) Arahat, venerable monk; (4) the chief disciples of Buddha; (5) one's mother; (6) one's father; (7) an honourable person; (8) one's mentor; (9) preacher of the Buddha's teachings; and (10) one's benefactor.
[381] Mary W Pye and Lucian W Pye, *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority* (Harvard University Press 2009).
[382] Nwe (n 380).
[383] Cavelle Dove, 'Giving Trends in Myanmar: More than Merit Making' (2017) 10 Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies 205.
[384] Carstens (n 235).
[385] Wai Wai Lwin, 'The Practice of Filial Piety in Myanmar Society' (2013) 11 Journal of the Myanmar Academy of Arts and Science 1.
[386] ibid.

similar way, the Chinese and Burmese have historically understood social harmony as a condition maintained by a system of hierarchies and rituals that guide and constrain social interaction.[387]

Nevertheless, there are some key differences between the Chinese and Burmese perspectives on social relations, and these differences may help explain the Burmese workers' different attitudes towards hierarchy. Mostly influenced by Confucian values, social relationships in China tend to emphasises the suppression of self-identity in favour of forging a social identity within structured hierarchical relations. [388] Social identity is purely status-based, regulated by hierarchical differences, and is almost impossible to change, for example a man assumes a 'father' identity after having children, but he remains the 'son' of his own father, and as the 'junior' he should always preserve hierarchical differences by being subservient to his father.

Contrarily, social relationships in Myanmar are influenced by Buddhist teachings. Everyone is equal before the law of '*karma*' to accumulate his or her own merit through altruistic behaviours and good deeds,[389] and in the course of this pursuit, everyone can forge a moral and spiritual identity that is detached from social relationships. Unlike in Confucian ethics that self-realisation is intricately tied to maintaining hierarchical distinctions and developing virtue of following propriety, in the Buddhist

[387] Walton (n 235).
[388] Kwang-Kuo Hwang, 'Filial Piety and Loyalty : Two Types of Social Identification in Kwang-Kuo Hwang' (1999) 2 Asian Journal of Social Psychology 163.
[389] Maung Maung, *Law and Custom in Burma and the Burmese Family* (Martinus Nijhoff 1963).

worldview, individual attainment of '*nirvana*' is everyone's goal, and the moral and spiritual good of each individual is ultimately more important than the good of any collective.[390] Since alternative paradigms of power are more valued, such that it is believed people are not exclusively defined by the intricate web of inflexible social obligations,[391] people's social power is derived not only from their role or position, but also from their personal, spiritual, and moral qualities.[392]

Therefore, it follows that under the influence of traditional notions of social relationships, the Burmese employees showed respect for hierarchy, but did not emphasise the significance of social distinctions and leader-follower distance based on socially defined titles as much as Chinese managers did. For social values influenced by Buddhist ethics, power relationships are seen as somewhat fluid and temporary, since everyone has the ability to change their '*karma*,' and thereby their social situation, by engaging in merit-making (or -losing) activities.[393] To the Burmese workers who were promoted as supervisors, they welcomed a higher salary, but were really not keen about receiving showy privileges that would create a distance between them and the frontline workers. Although supervisors were granted the position of authority over subordinates, as illustrated in the following section, their self-concepts

[390] Attaining *nirvana* is the religious goal of Buddhists, which means an existential awakening to egolessness and a liberation from craving and suffering: Robert AF Thurman, 'Guidelines for Buddhist Social Activism Based on Nagarjuna's "Jewel Garland of Royal Counsels"' (1986) 11 The Tibet Journal 8; Masao Abe and William R LaFleur, 'Buddhist Nirvana: Its Significance in Contemporary Thought and Life', *Zen and Western Thought* (Palgrave Macmillan 1985).
[391] John M Peek, 'Buddhism, Human Rights and the Japanese State' (1995) 17 Human Rights Quarterly 527.
[392] Harriden (n 378).
[393] ibid.

were more likely to fluctuate depending on the situation, and the preservation of personal and moral qualities might take precedence over the exercise of authority.

2.2 Negotiating Identity within Workplace Hierarchy and Relationships

As I have discussed in the previous sections, Chinese and Burmese people define themselves in terms of their role relationships in different ways. In the Chinese normative mindset, people tend to have a relational self-concept,[394] which is translated into stronger emphasis on role-based identity and hierarchical arrangement. As for the Burmese, they are more inclined to establish identity around other attributes, in addition to their assigned role within power relations. This subsection discusses a workplace incident to illustrate how identity is constructed and maintained in the organisational domain of Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd. I make reference to the concept of 'relational identity' proposed by Sluss and Ashforth which integrates one's role- and person-based identities and thereby the different levels of self within an organisation.[395] I also refer to the concept of 'work identity,' defined by Wallace as a person's sense of self constituted through positioning within relations of power in the workplace, as this concept provides perspective to understand identity as a process of interpersonal construction and meaning-making in relation to the

[394] Yimo Shen, Wan Ju Chou and John M Schaubroeck, 'The Roles of Relational Identification and Workgroup Cultural Values in Linking Authoritarian Leadership to Employee Performance' (2019) 28 European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology 498.
[395] David M Sluss and Blake E Ashforth, 'Relational Identity and Identification: Defining Ourselves through Work Relationships' (2007) 32 Academy of Management Review 9.

aspects of professional status, team solidarity, supervisor authority, and job responsibilities.[396]

The incident involved Pye Thin Oo,[397] a man in his early forties who was a senior supervisor of the packing section. It was a workday, but he and some of his colleagues decided to take a few hours off in the morning to attend a wedding ceremony at a village near the factory:

> 'My friends, the people working in the packing department, we went to the wedding together. We took two hours off, and some other people took the entire morning off.'[398]

With looming deadlines and products waiting to be packed, the Chinese manager of the packing section was probably very concerned that his staff was not at work and wanted them all back at work as soon as possible. It was still early in the morning, but the Chinese manager was getting increasingly impatient, so he called Pyo Thin Oo and confronted him. Things soon escalated quickly:

[396] See discussions on work identity in Janet Holmes,'Workplace Narratives, Professional Identity and Relational Practice'in Anna de Fina, Deborah Schiffrin and Michael Bamberg (eds), *Discourse and Identity (Studies in Interactional Sociolinguistics)* (Cambridge University Press 2006); Michelle Wallace, 'Managing and Developing Online Education : Issues of Change and Identity' (2002) 14 Journal of Workplace Learning 198.
[397] A pseudonym is used here to protect privacy.
[398] Interview 44, Burmese worker (senior supervisor).

> 'He [the Chinese manager] yelled at me again and again while I was at my friend's wedding ceremony. I yelled back at him. Later we calmed down a bit, and I tried my best to ask people to return to work.'[399]

Several hours later, Pye Thin Oo and a few of his colleagues returned to the factory. However, tensions flared up again when the Chinese manager discovered that not all the staff had returned. Pye Thin Oo tried to explain:

> 'They weren't my sons or relatives, so I didn't bring them all back. In the factory, I'm the supervisor, but outside of the factory, I'm not a supervisor and I'm not in charge of them [the workers]. Even so, he scolded me, "Why didn't you bring them back?" I replied, "They aren't my relatives, I'm only a supervisor in the factory, but outside, I'm not."'[400]

The Chinese manager's demand that Pye Thin Oo exercise his authority and order his staff to return to work, as well as Pye Thin Oo's reluctance to submit to this order, resulted in a conflict between them. My observation suggests that Pye Thin Oo was not a 'toothless' supervisor who was disregarded by his own staff and thus unable to take charge. As described by Pye Thin Oo himself and as observed by me, his staff was quite obedient to his commands. For example, when moving carton boxes to

[399] Interview 44, Burmese worker (senior supervisor).
[400] Interview 44, Burmese worker (senior supervisor).

prepare products for shipment, Pye Thin Oo would check the shipment list and instruct his staff to move the cartons, and his staff almost never questioned his orders. With a name tag to wear, photos of Pye Thin Oo on notice boards, and his regular demonstration of authority to supervise workers, Pye Thin Oo was probably well aware of his power derived from his elevated position within the workplace hierarchy.

If perceived authority was not the issue, Pye Thin Oo's reluctant attitude to assert authority over his staff can be analysed from his perception of hierarchy and his sense of self-identity in the workplace. During our conversation, Pye Thin Oo admitted that he was the senior supervisor, but he described his team as 'friends.' He shared that his workers would frequently crack jokes with him, and even after getting reprimanded by the Chinese manager, he continued to 'have fun with them.' In other words, it appears that without much of an intention to reinforce the hierarchy and maintain a distance from his staff, Pye Thin Oo in his relational identity choice between role-based (goals, values, beliefs, norms, interaction styles associated with the role) and person-based identity (personal qualities associated with the role),[401] tended towards prioritising the latter, as he tried to preserve his image as a warm and approachable supervisor. Role-based identity may call for maintaining a hierarchy of distance from colleagues even out of the workplace, but Pye Thin Oo was prepared to transcend and 'soften' his role-based identity in order to develop meaningful, particularised, and personal relationships with his staff. As most supervisors in the

[401] Sluss and Ashforth (n 395).

factory, he showed flexibility in dealing with hierarchical distinctions, and he wished to narrow the power distance between him and his subordinates.

According to the social identity theory, people construct their self-identity by classifying themselves into groups which they can locate a place for themselves, pursue positive self-reinforcement, and maintain a sense of social belonging and individuality.[402] Concerning challenges in work-related contexts, such as the case of Pye Thin Oo, people often exercise their agency by engaging in the negotiation of work identity and the corresponding expectations and obligations. Pye Thin Oo might be embedded in structured workplace hierarchy and was obligated to define himself via role-based categorisation and occupational demands. Nevertheless, facing the demand to suppress his agency, he was driven by his desire for personal expression, given his self-perception as a member of a valued group of friends. As noted by Alvesson and his colleagues, taking on a social identity involves negotiating intersection with other identities and making individualised meaning in interactions with people and systems.[403] The friendship, positive emotional attachment, and social identity developed in the work environment became an important part of Pye Thin Oo's work identity, prompting him to engaging in an active process of identity negotiation.

[402] Michael a Hogg, Deborah J Terry and Katherine M White, 'A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory with Social Identity Theory' (1995) 58 Social Psychology 255; DE Abrams and MA Hogg, *Social Identity Theory: Constructive and Critical Advances* (Springer-Verlag Publishing 1990); Kate Walsh and Judith R Gordon, 'Creating an Individual Work Identity' (2008) 18 Human Resource Management Review 46.

[403] Mats Alvesson, Karen Lee Ashcraft and Robyn Thomas, 'Identity Matters: Reflections on the Construction of Identity Scholarship in Organization Studies' (2008) 15 Organization 5.

The back-and-forth argument between Pye Thin Oo and the Chinese manager was a conflict arising from a clash of expectations: between the Chinese manager's expectations regarding Pye Thin Oo, deriving from his role-based occupational identity, and Pye Thin Oo's expectations, deriving from his personal and social identities. When confronted by the Chinese manager, Pye Thin Oo negotiated for an identity that was compatible with his preference and self-view. He refuted by saying that he was 'no longer a supervisor' outside of the factory, so he could not order all his staff to return to duties. At the risk of damaging his relationship with the Chinese manager, he chose to prioritise local- and person-based attributes over formalistic titles, and to project his social identity as a friend outside the workplace with his colleagues, while retaining his organisational and occupational identities as a supervisor within the physical boundaries of the factory.

Certain external factors may influence the way people construct their self-identity, yet the case of Pye Thin Oo suggests identity is ultimately a matter of individual choice. Pye Thin Oo's sense of agency drove him to set a boundary to his role-based identity and responsibility as leader of his staff. The incident shows that when identity incongruence occurred, he was prepared to embrace flexibility among the categorisations representing different expectations for him, such depending on the situation, he might exercise kinship-based authority on his younger relatives outside of family context, but not exercise hierarchy-based authority on his colleagues. As Wheeler suggests, increasingly employees can no longer rest content with an identity that is simply handed down to them, and they need to balance opportunities from

within a climate of personal autonomy.[404] In negotiating his identity, Pye Thin Oo was able to develop awareness of and strategies for his subjectivity that he could ensure sense of continuity of his preferred identities, while avoiding passive subjection to external forces imposing categorisations on him.[405]

3. Conclusion

In this chapter, my argument is that the Chinese managers, influenced by their work experiences in China and traditional understandings of social relationships that defined practices and beliefs about social order, chose to strengthen the workplace hierarchy by maintaining distance with subordinates and enforcing a set of role- and position-based distinctions. It is through these principles of hierarchy that unequal management-labour relations were sustained, and Chinese managers were recognised as the dominant force within the organisation. The workplace at this factory was not constructed based on autonomy, equality, and participation, but rather on superficial harmony, in which people adopted hierarchical practices and accepted their responsibilities according to their positions. The Burmese workers generally accepted such arrangements at work, reflecting norms of social relationships in Myanmar which adhere to hierarchical distinctions based on '*karmic*' differences sustained by unequal power relations.[406]

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[404] Sally Wheeler, 'Ethics in the Workplace' (2007) 18 Law and Critique 1.
[405] Katja Vähäsantanen and Anneli Eteläpelto, 'Vocational Teachers in the Face of a Major Educational Reform : Individual Ways of Negotiating Professional Identities' (2009) 22 Journal of Education and Work 15.
[406] Dove (n 383).

However, entangled in the workplace hierarchy, the Burmese workers had some significant differences in their behaviour. In their role as supervisors, they sought to narrow their distance with the frontline workers and be seen as friends. In their roles as frontline workers, they casually bypassed the hierarchy of command. As a result of their tendency to establish self-identity based on other attributes in addition to their assigned position, they were open to negotiating their identity based on their beliefs to guide their behaviour within a system of management-designed hierarchy. Pye Thin Oo's incident illustrates how traditional ideas of social relationships in Myanmar impacted such identity negotiation processes. Being aware that power should be derived and exercised in accordance with personal attributes as well as social status, Pye Thin Oo, who was a senior supervisor and years older than the frontline workers, opted not to exercise his authority as a 'senior' and pressure his 'juniors.' To maintain his personal qualities as a 'friend,' he ultimately chose to respect, or at least tolerate, the decision made by his staff.

As a result of their culturally informed beliefs, factory members' principles of hierarchy ultimately determined their tendency to establish informal relationships across cultural borders. Pye Thin Oo as a local of Pakokku City in Myanmar, where informal relationships are just as critical as they are in China, developed close relationships with his staff with whom he shared a common background, and his informal power derived from personal relationships provided him with a softer way of exerting influence and obtaining consent. Using the possibilities of mutually

reciprocated favours and good will, he could promote 'appropriate' workplace behaviour. In contrast, Chinese managers resisted establishing informal relationships with Burmese due to the hierarchy principles they embraced. Due to their propensity towards role-based identity, their workplace behaviour remained largely influenced by their rights and responsibilities as managers, and they relied heavily on rules enforcement as a primary method of controlling employees and reducing deviance.

CHAPTER SEVEN – CONTRASTING PRINCIPLES OF RECIPROCITY, FAIRNESS, AND WORK ETHIC

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the differences in the principles of reciprocity, fairness, and work ethic held by Chinese managers and Burmese workers, and the related tensions that resulted from these differences. It is my contention that socio-cultural constructs were fundamental in forming such principles, which in turn affected how people evaluated events in the workplace. This chapter begins with a description of an incident that involved the distribution of a bonus in order to demonstrate how reciprocal norms and behaviours were understood and manifested differently. I then discuss my observations regarding the principles of fairness as expressed by Chinese managers and Burmese workers, and their respective justifications and complaints regarding alleged practices of preferential treatment. It is followed by a discussion of different perspectives on work ethic, and how there appeared to be a gradual convergence to the standards expected in modern industrial capitalism.

1. Principles of Reciprocity

In this section, I explore the differences in the cultures of reciprocity between Burmese workers and Chinese managers. Reciprocity, the act of providing benefits to another in return for benefits received, is a defining characteristic of social exchange. It rids

people of uncertainty and demonstrates a willingness to invest in a relationship.[407] Gouldner argues that norms of reciprocity is 'no less universal and important an element of culture than the incest taboo,' yet he also recognises its concrete formulations 'may vary with time and place.' [408] Researchers have noted that internalised norms of reciprocity differ among individuals, and prevailing socialisation and cultural practices can influence individuals' internalised propensity to perform reciprocal behaviour of varying valence.[409]

My purpose in this section is to briefly describe a workplace dispute involving varying interpretations of reciprocity, which eventually led to the introduction of a new factory rule by a Chinese manager to enforce the practice he promoted. Using this incident as an illustration, I would like to demonstrate the different ways in which Chinese and Burmese workers perceived and acted upon reciprocity at this workplace.

1.1 Dispute over the Distribution of Bonuses

Around November 2019, a dispute arose between the Chinese manager of the sewing section, Mr. Mei, and a junior Burmese supervisor of his section regarding bonuses. The case was not a typical instance of factory workers complaining to management about low salaries and requesting higher bonuses. On the contrary, it was quite the

[407] Linda D Molm, David R Schaefer and Jessica L Collett, 'The Value of Reciprocity' (2007) 70 Social Psychology Quarterly 199.
[408] Alvin W Gouldner, 'The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement Related Papers' (1960) 25 American Sociological Review 161.
[409] Marco Perugini and others, 'The Personal Norm of Reciprocity' (2003) 17 European Journal of Personality 251.

opposite. As a recognition for exceptional performance, Mr. Mei represented the factory in the awarding of a bonus to a junior supervisor working under him. Later, Mr. Mei learned that the worker had retained all of the bonus for herself, and he was not pleased with this. The following incident serves as an example used by Mr. Mei to explain to me why he believes some Burmese workers are 'too selfish' when it comes to their own interests:

> 'There was this junior supervisor ... If I help you out a lot, and your production output goes up, you'll get a larger bonus. And then, after helping her out, whether it was a junior supervisor, delivery worker, or garment worker, they didn't get paid a dime, while she got tens of thousands. As she was the "bigger one," I told this junior supervisor, "They [other workers] helped you out a lot, give them a little money and treat them to some food or something." But she didn't want to. She was being really selfish, I thought! Without the help of others, she wouldn't have gotten anything.'[410]

Astonished by the alleged 'selfishness' of the junior supervisor's decision not to share the bonus or treat other workers to food, Mr. Mei decided it was a problem that he had to solve. Instead of leaving it in the hands of the junior supervisor, he 'redistributed' the bonus to those workers who had helped her achieve what she could not on her own:

[410] Interview 40, Chinese manager.

> 'I had to handle it myself. So, I took thirty thousand and told her [the junior supervisor] to treat the workers to some food. Otherwise, it'll be hard for me to reassign workers in the future. The supervisor was very upset. But the money was up to me! I had to do the right thing!'[411]

In an effort to prevent this situation from occurring again, Mr. Mei made it mandatory for workers to return favour to anyone who helped boost their production output, thus enabling them to win a bonus:

> 'I tell them, when you can't make all the products yourself, you'll need help, and when you get extra money from people helping you, treat them. You've got to do it whether you like it or not. We've got to do this. I told them in advance about this arrangement.' [412]

Observing the incident, it appears that the Chinese manager had serious concerns about his junior supervisor's behaviour, to the extent that he had to create a new rule designed to specifically target such alleged 'non-reciprocal' behaviour and to promote the reciprocal behaviour he approved of. In Mr. Mei's opinion, he was forced to implement this because of his concern for the factory's production, as he believed that the workers would no longer help one another when they knew they would receive no reward, and this would make it more difficult for him to assign garment workers

[411] Interview 40, Chinese manager.
[412] Interview 40, Chinese manager.

to production lines that are running behind schedule and in need of more workers. In reviewing this incident, however, it becomes apparent that it was not only his concerns about production, but also his norms of reciprocity that led him to perceive the junior supervisor's action as 'selfish.'

1.2 Chinese Managers' Reciprocity Norms: Bilateral Human Feelings

Although reciprocity is the universal moral rule of social cohesion in most cultures, it is viewed as an exceptionally important mechanism in the mainstream of Chinese values to maintain individual relationships with relatives, neighbours, classmates, and colleagues.[413] The principles of reciprocity prevalent among many Chinese people is tightly bound up with the idea of '*renqing,*' which literally means 'human feelings' but connotes a range of other meanings.[414] In his seminal study of gift-giving and related social activities that pervade daily life in a small rural village in China, anthropologist Yunxiang Yan identified *'renqing'* as the social norms and moral obligations maintaining interpersonal relationships there, and through reciprocal behaviour, *'renqing'* becomes a resource for the villagers to be used as a medium of social exchange.[415] When one receives a favour from another, he or she is considered to be in '*renqing*' debt to that person, and is expected to act upon the etiquette of returning the favour.

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[413] Kwang-Kuo Hwang, 'Face and Favor: The Chinese Power Game' (1987) 92 American Journal of Sociology 944.
[414] ibid.
[415] Yunxiang Yan, *The Flow of Gifts: Reciprocity and Social Networks in a Chinese Village* (Stanford University Press 1996).

Since Chinese people are more accustomed to an idea of harmony built upon interdependency and mutual trust, it becomes paramount for them to sustain relationships through establishing a strict equilibrium between receiving and giving.[416] The operating principles of reciprocity, therefore, are converted into concrete rules of material exchange. As Yan explains, one important aspect is the concept of sharing, which functions as a moral basis of '*renqing*' to constrain both the helper and the helped; for the former, it means the obligation to share with others, and for the latter, it means the right to share in the former's resources.[417] As the recognition of '*renqing*' is crucial to the art of 'making oneself a person,' those perceived as lacking '*renqing*' and not exhibiting the natural feelings of obligation to others may have their moral worth put into serious question.[418]

As such, it is understandable that in the eyes of Mr. Mei, the junior supervisor's failure to share a single cent of her bonus with colleagues was viewed as very selfish behaviour that showed no regard for others. Considering that the junior supervisor is alleged to have taken advantage of the situation by receiving assistance, her refusal to share the bonus or treat her colleagues to a meal is considered an act of taking without returning, a serious violation of the norms of reciprocity and exchange of material goods. In mainstream Chinese thinking, the lack of '*renqing*' and the failure to pay back a '*renqing*' debt may carry severe moral implications. A failure to follow social

[416] Xiaohong Wei and Qingyuan Li, 'The Confucian Value of Harmony and Its Influence on Chinese Social Interaction' (2013) 9 Cross-Cultural Communication 60.
[417] Yan (n 415).
[418] Julie Y Chu, *Cosmologies of Credit: Transnational Mobility and the Politics of Destination in China* (Duke University Press 2010).

rules of reciprocity, once known to others, can result in the loss of social standing and moral character within the social network, and can be interpreted as a sign of the individual's intention to end the relationship.[419]

1.3 Burmese Workers' Reciprocity Norms: The Circular Flow

According to Mr. Mei, the Burmese are 'ruthlessly selfish' when it comes to seeking their own benefit, but based on my observations, it is very difficult to conclude that the Burmese are inherently more selfish and ungrateful than Chinese. Despite being one of the poorest countries in Asia, Myanmar has topped a global generosity list for years.[420] Across religious and ethnic lines, the Burmese give money more regularly than anywhere else in the world.[421] There are many poems, proverbs, and literary works in Myanmar stressing the role of gratitude in moral conducts of social relationships.[422] In their research, Andrews and Htun identify benevolence and gratitude as key constructs in Burmese societal culture, such that within one's network, recipient of an act of kindness should acknowledge it through acts of reciprocated gratitude, often for as long as either party may live and even if one is very poor.[423]

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[419] Olwen Bedford, 'Guanxi-Building in the Workplace: A Dynamic Process Model of Working and Backdoor Guanxi' (2011) 104 Journal of Business Ethics 149; Dorothy A Yen, Bradley R Barnes and Cheng Lu Wang, 'The Measurement of Guanxi: Introducing the GRX Scale' (2011) 40 Industrial Marketing Management 97.

[420] Hiroko Kawanami, *The Culture of Giving in Myanmar: Buddhist Offerings, Reciprocity and Interdependence* (Bloomsbury Publishing 2020).

[421] Dove (n 383).

[422] Nwe (n 380).

[423] TG Andrews and KT Htun, *Business Networks in Myanmar: Kjei Zu, Corrosion and Reform* (Chris Rowley, Jane Nolan and Malcolm Warner eds, Elsevier 2017).

When Mr. Mei described the incident, I noticed that he took no effort to view 'reciprocity' from a Burmese angle rather than his own. Admittedly, there exists the possibility that the junior supervisor never intended to return favour by any means. Research on distributive justice suggests that people may hold on to the lion's share of pay-offs because they refuse to be constrained by fairness considerations and feel like they are morally entitled to keep everything as long as permissible under the rules.[424] Nevertheless, norms of reciprocity are hardly universalisable at the level of autonomous individuals. Narratives of reciprocity in Myanmar diverge in their form and emphasis, and what is considered appropriate reciprocal behaviour can be thematically structured by different moral principles and reinterpreted by different conceptualisations, as parties navigate their interpersonal relations.[425]

Western scholars, and particularly American researchers, have posited that appropriate procedures should work to enhance people's perception of fairness in organisational settings in so far as they produce consistent allocations, suppress biases, are based on reliable information, are correctable, and take into account the concerns of all recipients,[426] and people's concern about being fairly treated is driven by the

[424] Alexander W Cappelen and others, 'The Pluralism of Fairness Ideals: An Experimental Approach' (2007) 97 American Economic Review 818; Michael Krawczyk, 'A Glimpse through the Veil of Ignorance: Equality of Opportunity and Support for Redistribution' (2010) 94 Journal of Public Economics 131; Susanne Burri, Daniela Lup and Alexander Pepper, 'What Do Business Executives Think About Distributive Justice?' (2021) 174 Journal of Business Ethics 15.
[425] Carstens (n 235).
[426] Jerald Greenberg and Tom R Tyler, 'Why Procedural Justice in Organizations?' (1987) 1 Social Justice Research 127; Gerald S Leventhal, Jurgis Karuza and William R Fry, 'Beyond Fairness: A Theory of Allocation Preferences' in Gerold Mikula (ed), *Justice and Social Interaction* (Springer-Verlag 1980).

needs to feel valued, respected, and included in important groups.[427] Although procedural justice serves as a tool to assess aspects of organisational procedure, such established theory may not always explain behaviour and predict perception of fairness, particularly in non-Western settings. Molm, Takahashi, and Peterson, for example, demonstrate how negotiated exchanges including procedural justice elements like collective decision-making, knowledge in advance of terms, mutual consent, and binding agreements are perceived as less fair than reciprocal exchanges.[428] As they assert that what constitutes 'fair' in procedural justice can undermine social exchanges like trust and affective ties, they cite cultural anthropologists who have long recognised the symbolic significance of reciprocal exchanges in society.[429] Unlike procedural justice whose theoretical applications rarely take into account the cultural influences involved in its interpretation, studies of reciprocity generally acknowledge the variety of forms of reciprocity that depend on cultural and individual factors.

In her study of the culture of gift exchanges in Myanmar, anthropologist Hiroko Kawanami argues that reciprocity as prevalently practised in Myanmar should not be understood as a dualistic model of symbiosis with a dichotomous positioning of 'us' versus 'them.' She contends the Burmese people are accustomed to relationships of giving and receiving that are more circular in nature, are facilitated by a multitude of

[427] E Allan Lind and Tom R Tyler, *The Social Psychology of Procedural Justice* (Springer 1988); Tom R Tyler and E Allan Lind, 'A Relational Model of Authority in Groups' (1992) 25 Advances in Experimental Social Psychology 115.
[428] Linda D. Molm, Gretchen Peterson and Nobuyuki Takahashi, 'In the Eye of the Beholder: Procedural Justice in Social Exchange' (2003) 68 American Sociological Review 128.
[429] ibid.

reciprocal transactions, and are conducted in the expectation that a continuous flow of items will be given, received, and passed around.[430] Therefore, it can be argued that in the mainstream of Burmese social practices, the rules of material exchange are not nearly as concrete or bilateral as those of the Chinese. Using the structural analysis of reciprocity developed by Molm, whereas Chinese people are more concerned with establishing a bilateral flow of benefits in exchanges that are negotiated and constrained by social rules of reciprocity, the Burmese engage in exchange activity that is typically not restricted to dyadic units, and benefits may flow from one actor to another in an exchange network in which all actors can initiate exchange at any given time. [431] In other words, initiations may be reciprocated at different times, from somebody else, and in different forms.

Given how cycles of reciprocity operate in Myanmar, the said junior supervisor and colleagues who lent a helping hand might have assigned different meanings to the exchange and expected reciprocity to be manifested through different ways. Blau distinguishes between 'economic exchange' in organisations which is typified by transaction resting on a formal contract that stipulates the exact terms for reciprocal relationship, and 'social exchange' which entails obligations of an unspecified nature and time frame with reciprocity left as discretionary.[432] Whereas helpful behaviour and work sharing, paralleling the narrative deployed by Mr. Mei, can be construed as a bilateral flow of benefits in negotiated contract-like 'economic exchange'

[430] Kawanami (n 420).
[431] Linda D Molm, 'The Structure of Reciprocity' (2010) 73 Social Psychology Quarterly 119.
[432] Peter M Blau, *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (John Wiley & Sons 1964).

relationship that obligates symmetrical reciprocity, it can also be construed as a form of 'social exchange' which colleagues perform acts that benefit another without negotiation and not knowing whether, or when, or to what extent the other will reciprocate.[433] Reciprocal behaviour among workers may change in proportion to the strength of relations between actors. It may operate more effectively on specific types of ties which parties have something in common and maintain emotional attachment.[434]

As a result, it is possible that the junior supervisor and her colleagues did not consider their relationship as a short-term exchange requiring a return of material benefits. For example, both Wellman and Walker note that reciprocity among friends is often normative and voluntary in nature, and that driven by mutual trust, the return on favours may occur flexibly in a more private social interaction, at a more distant future, or by different people in the network, like a karaoke session together during the weekends.[435] As Mr. Mei had limited knowledge of the way of life of the general Burmese population, he was unable to ascertain whether the junior supervisor's perceived violation of reciprocity norms would lead to social sanctions, like how often in the Chinese context that people who break the *'renqing'* social rules would suffer consequences within their social network. Consequently, in order to avoid the

[433] Linda D Molm, Jessica L Collett and David R Schaefer, 'Building Solidarity through Generalized Exchange: A Theory of Reciprocity' (2007) 113 American Journal of Sociology 205.
[434] Felicia F Tian, 'Is Guanxi Unfair? Market Reform and the Public Attitude toward Guanxi in Urban China' (2020) 7 Journal of Chinese Sociology 1.
[435] Barry Wellman, 'Structural Analysis: From Method and Metaphor to Theory and Substance' in Barry Wellman and SD Berkowitz (eds), *Social Structures: A Network Approach* (Cambridge University Press 1988); Karen Walker, '"Always There for Me": Friendship Patterns and Expectations among Middle- and Working-Class Men and Women' (1995) 10 Sociological Forum 273.

breakdown in workplace relationships and loss of productivity, Mr. Mei felt compelled to step in and impose his own rules since he could not trust the Burmese workers to 'police' themselves through their social relationships. His decision serves as another example of how nuances of workplace relations are shaped by cultural practices and meanings, since Chinese managers initiated top-down measures to standardise the work environment based on their culturally influenced expectations.

As a summary to this section, it can be said that the incident at the workplace concerning the distribution of bonuses is an illustration of different culturally informed principles of reciprocity between the Chinese managers and the Burmese workers. It is noteworthy that Chinese managers derived their ideas of reciprocity from the concept of '*renqing*,' the basic concept of social relationships prevalent among the Chinese, which defines the concrete reciprocal obligations in social exchanges. Burmese workers, however, conducted social exchange differently, as the exchange of benefits in relationships tends to be less constrained and can take various forms depending on the circumstances and time. When Chinese managers held Burmese workers to the same standards of reciprocity, they resorted to black-letter rules to control the dynamics of workplace relationships, causing the workers to lose opportunities to exercise their agency and enhance interpersonal trust within workplace social networks.

2. Principles of Fairness

As fairness is a norm-based concept, what constitutes 'fairness' differs from person to person and country to country. The perception and behavioural patterns of fairness require consideration of distributive justice concerns, which are said to be influenced by cultural and situational factors. Reis argues that people use the 'need rule' when they are concerned about other people's welfare, the 'equality rule' when they strive to achieve harmonious relations, and the 'equity rule' when they are concerned with maximising productivity.[436] In their study of the influence of cultural orientations, Hui, Triandis, and Yee argue that Chinese people are more 'egalitarian' in their reward distributions than Americans because of their 'collectivist' tendency.[437] There are research concluding that orientation of distribution justice vary by culture, wherein 'individualistic' cultures favour the 'equity rule,' and 'collectivistic' cultures favour the 'equality rule.'[438]

Although the notion of 'fairness' is closely linked to the notion of distributive justice, people have struggled to come up with a solid definition of fairness, and it is argued that fairness is too often interpreted in a narrow and technical way.[439] Safe to say, fairness is not merely a synonym for absolute equality, because the perception of fairness is essentially a socially constructed attitude and is a subjective judgment,

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[436] Harry T Reis, 'The Multidimensionality of Justice' in Robert Folger (ed), *The Sense of Injustice: Social Psychological Perspectives* (Plenum Press 1984); Zhixue Zhang and Chung Fang Yang, 'Beyond Distributive Justice: The Reasonableness Norm in Chinese Reward Allocation' (1998) 1 Asian Journal of Social Psychology 253.

[437] C Harry Hui, Harry C Triandis and Candice Yee, 'Cultural Differences in Reward Allocation: Is Collectivism the Explanation?' (1991) 30 British Journal of Social Psychology 145.

[438] See JK Giacobbe-Miller and others, 'Country and Organizational-Level Adaptation to Foreign Workplace Ideologies: A Comparative Study of Distributive Justice Values in China, Russia and the United States' (2003) 34 Journal of International Business Studies 389.

[439] Caroline Gipps and Gordon Stobart, 'Fairness in Assessment', (GTC Conference - New Relationships: Teaching, Learning and Accountability, London, 2004).

often resulting from the process of argumentation or persuasion, rather than rational calculation of inputs and outputs.[440] People tend to perceive and experience resource allocation arrangements differently when they have different schemas and scripts about what fairness means.

In this section, I discuss the principles of fairness by setting them within the specific context of Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd in order to examine what they mean to the Chinese managers and Burmese workers. The discrepancy between fairness values, although tolerable, represents a potential source of grievance that adversely affects workplace relationships.

2.1 Chinese Managers' Ideas of Fairness: Equity and Pragmatism

In general, Chinese scholars suggest that because in the mainstream of Chinese values there is a strong emphasis upon relational responsibilities, resource distribution in the Chinese context frequently is not merely an act of calculation and allocation motivated by self-interest concerns, but a social action in which people communicate and exchange feelings at appropriate social situations.[441] For example, it has been argued that under the norms of '*renqing*,' people are expected to show appropriate concern and empathy to others in the way they distribute resources to members of the same

[440] James Fraser and Michael Hodge, 'Job Satis Faction in Higher Education: Examining Gender in Professional Work Settings' (2000) 70 Sociological Inquiry 172; Wilbert E Moore, 'But Some Are More Equal Than Other' (1963) 28 American Sociological Review 13; Robert J Bies, 'The Predicament of Injustice: The Management of Moral Outrage' in LL Cummings and BM Staw (eds), *Research in Organizational Behavior Volume 9* (JAI Press 1987).

[441] Zhang and Yang (n 436); Zhi-Xue Zhang, 'Chinese Conceptions of Justice and Reward Allocation' in Uichol Kim, Kuo-Shu Yang and Kwang-Kuo Hwang (eds), *Indigenous and Cultural Psychology: Understanding People in Context* (Springer 2006).

social network.[442] Researchers have found that Chinese workers, influenced by '*renqing*' concern, tend to allocate rewards differently depending on their own contribution as compared with their co-workers, suggesting their '*renqing*'-influenced tendency to downplay individual contribution for the preservation of interpersonal harmony.[443]

The 'face-favour theory' posits that Chinese people employ different rules of social exchange in different types of '*guanxi*' relationships, and the strength of '*guanxi*' may vary depending on the bases, quality, and stage.[444] Further, in their study of the Chinese conception of resource distribution, Zhang and Yang argue that Chinese people are influenced considerably by '*guanxi*' when they juxtapose *'renqing'* norms and rational calculation in making distribution decisions.[445] A strong '*guanxi*' brings with it a strong obligation of *'renqing'* to give face by offering more rewards no matter contribution, while a weak '*guanxi*' implies weak '*renqing*' obligation such that rewards can simply be distributed according to strict calculation of perceived contribution. The prevalent conception of resource distribution in the Chinese context, therefore, is characterised by patterns of differential treatment derived from both equity norms and affective motivations.

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[442] See Hwang, 'Face and Favor: The Chinese Power Game' (n 413); Guicheng Shi and others, 'The Role of Renqing in Mediating Customer Relationship Investment and Relationship Commitment in China' (2011) 40 Industrial Marketing Management 496.
[443] Kwang-Kuo Hwang, *Foundations of Chinese Psychology: Confucian Social Relations* (Springer 2012); Kwok Leung and Michael H Bond, 'The Impact of Cultural Collectivism on Reward Allocation' (1984) 47 Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 793.
[444] Hwang, 'Face and Favor: The Chinese Power Game' (n 413); Xiao-Ping Chen and Chao C Chen, 'On the Intricacies of the Chinese Guanxi: A Process Model of Guanxi Development' (2004) 21 Asia Pacific Journal of Management 305.
[445] Zhang and Yang (n 436).

In my investigation of the factory policies, it appears, in large part, that the Chinese managers were guided by principles of equity, rather than '*guanxi*' or affective concerns. In this factory, several policies reflected meritocratic beliefs. As a result of their performance and experience, Burmese frontline workers would be promoted to supervisor positions. Employees with exceptional production output would receive bonuses, while those who performed poorly would be disciplined. For those who work overtime, they would receive double pay, and overtime work opportunities would be allocated to those with satisfactory performance ratings in the eyes of management. This was contrasted by a Chinese manager with what he observed at a state-owned garment factory in Yangon, where the workers were government employees paid a fixed hourly wage. Their performance would not be rewarded or punished, and they were automatically promoted after working there for a certain period of time. In expressing their disapproval of governmental factories failing miserably within a few years, Chinese managers claimed that the government workers enjoyed too much welfare, had too many demands, and were not hardworking enough. An 'egalitarian' approach, according to Chinese managers, would be doomed to failure, while they claimed to embrace an equity-based method of rewarding workers in accordance with their contributions.

As the Chinese managers upheld their notions of 'systematic management' and equity norms, they were influenced by pragmatic concerns and tended to offer differential treatment to workers depending on their perceived contribution to the factory. For

instance, Ms Ying, the Chinese manager at the sewing section, explained how she would treat each worker differently, depending on how she evaluated the performance and 'usefulness' of that worker:

> 'It really depends on whether I use this worker. I'm not going to teach her if I don't use her. I'm going to use the factory rules. I'll teach her more if I use her. I'll need more ways to punish and encourage her if she gets a more special position, like a junior supervisor. That depends on whether I use them. If I do, I think of ways to help them. If I don't, I just act according to factory rules.'[446]

In the above quote, we learn that Chinese managers' resource distribution behaviour was highly pragmatic, and that affective components did not appear to play a major role. Chinese managers gave greater attention and resources to workers considered to be 'useful' and took harsher disciplinary measures against workers deemed 'not useful.' However, Chinese managers' opinions about Burmese workers might be influenced by their own subjective experiences. It is true that they claimed that they would only consider a worker's contribution, but their actual decisions might be influenced by the length of the collaborative relationship, as they might be inclined to trust a worker based on their position and experience since there was no method to objectively measure worker productivity. Even though they adopted a rule-oriented approach, the rules were sometimes enforced in a selective and even biased manner,

[446] Interview 46, Chinese manager.

turning a blind eye to rule-deviations taken by workers who were considered to be 'useful.' This discretionary nature of rule-enforcement echoes the discovery of Zhu and his colleagues in their study of Chinese organisations that, depending on the feelings and motivations of rule enforcers, the penalties for certain individuals who break the rules may be lighter, mitigated, or exempted.[447]

2.2 Burmese Workers' Ideas of Fairness: Equality and Appreciation

While conducting my fieldwork, I observed that the Chinese managers' method of differential treatment was contrary to the expectations of many Burmese workers. Burmese workers had frequently complained to me about the Chinese management's 'unfair treatment,' and they expressed a strong desire to be 'treated fairly.' A worker from the cutting section described how the Chinese management granted annual leave to some workers, however he bombarded others with questions, such as, 'Why do you want to take a day off?' or 'What's your problem?' A worker from the sewing section said she noticed some workers were given promotion opportunities but not others. In the packing section, which contained two subsections, brasseries and night dresses, a worker of the night dresses subsection complained that the Chinese manager was favouring the workers in the brasseries subsection, claiming that he only reprimanded and disciplined workers at the night dresses subsection, yet displayed a tolerant attitude toward the workers in the brasseries subsection.

[447] Jinqiang Zhu and others, 'Ethical Leadership and Employee Pro-Social Rule-Breaking Behavior in China' (2018) 17 Asian Business and Management 59.

There were a few Burmese workers that supported meritocratic management practices. For example, Kyal Soe, a packing section worker, said she was encouraged to work hard and treat the job like her own business by the Chinese managers, and she became angry when some workers taunted her by stating that they would receive the same daily salary of 4,800 kyats as she, regardless of how slack they were. It was deemed 'fair' to Kyal Soe that the Chinese managers punished the 'lazy workers' by denying them overtime work opportunities, while rewarding 'hardworking workers' like her with bonuses. It appears to me, however, that many Burmese workers were not in favour of equity-based practices. According to some of their complaints against Chinese management, they considered it unfair that certain workers received preferential treatment, even if these workers were acknowledged to be smarter and more competent than the rest of the group:

> 'When I was getting training some time ago, the "*siya*" gave extra attention and preference to the smart workers, and that's not fair. I want the factory to be fair and friendly to us all.'[448]

> 'I don't like how the "*siya*" gives other people more opportunities than me. I need to complain if there's a fairness issue with the job. If it's not related to the job, I won't complain. If we have the same job, but some others get more opportunities, that's unfair.'[449]

[448] Interview 57, Burmese worker (frontline).
[449] Interview 38, Burmese worker (senior supervisor).

Accordingly, for many Burmese workers, fairness is based on equal opportunities and treatment for all. In their view, relationships should be disassociated from performance, and the workplace should maintain a cooperative, congenial atmosphere rather than foster a competitive, performance-based culture. Bloeijenbergh, Peters, and Poutsma found that there are very different interpretations of equality, even within our specific context of the modern workplace, that while equality can be construed as meritocracy by providing extra support and preferential treatment depending on individual talents, it can be viewed as giving different treatment to achieve equal outcomes, or giving the same treatment in a standard manner. [450] As a result, different interpretations lead to different expectations of managerial behaviour. The Burmese workers' expectations regarding resource allocation can be contrasted with the Chinese managers' tendency to give differential treatment based on equity and pragmatic considerations.

What explains the Burmese workers' expectation of fairness at work? My argument is that it can be analysed in relation to historical and socio-cultural factors. As anthropologist Keeler points out in his work, traditional Burmese society cannot be characterised as egalitarian; as he explains, egalitarian ideology runs contrary to fundamental assumptions about how social relations work in Myanmar, and hierarchy and thus inequality, which differences necessarily generate, are perceived as being inherent.[451] However, in the 1960s, the military took control of the country

[450] Inge Bleijenbergh, Pascale Peters and Erik Poutsma, 'Diversity Management beyond the Business Case' (2010) 29 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal 413.
[451] Ward Keeler, *The Traffic in Hierarchy: Masculinity and Its Others in Buddhist Burma* (University of Hawaii Press 2017).

and began a socialist revolution to reform the nation's social, political, and economic systems.[452] With the extensive nationalisation of major private enterprises, most factory workers became government employees. A strict hierarchy existed in factories, with managers and engineers at the top entitled to job security and monthly salaries, and workers at the bottom entitled to open-ended contracts that paid out daily wages. In spite of this, workers of the same rank enjoyed stable government employment, and gained the equal right to be promoted, to join the ruling socialist party, and to join government-sponsored workers' councils after some years of service.[453] Despite the fact that the socialist party lost power in the late 1980s, nationalisation programs were not reversed until the early 2010s, and socialist employment practices persist today.

Moreover, Buddhist values may have an effect on the Burmese people's perception of fairness. Ratanakul suggests that in Buddhist teachings, fairness is understood in terms of impartiality and equality, as all people, despite their '*karmic*' differences, have fundamentally equal moral potential.[454] Comparing and reflecting on the features of Western and Buddhist values, Cummiskey argues that the Western liberal concepts of justice as described by Rawls emphasise the moral importance of the distinctness and separateness of persons, while Buddhism emphasises the interdependence of persons.[455] The different treatment received by people in a meritocratic system, even

[452] Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 'Reconsidering the Failure of the Burma Socialist Programme Party Government to Eradicate Internal Economic Impediments' (2003) 11 South East Asia Research 5.
[453] Stephen Campbell, 'Labour Formalisation as Selective Hegemony in Reform-Era Myanmar' (2019) 20 Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology 57.
[454] Rinit Ratanakul, 'Bioethics in Thailand: The Struggle for Buddhist Solutions' (1988) 13 Journal of Medicine and Philosophy (United Kingdom) 302.
[455] David Cummiskey, 'Comparative Reflections on Buddhist Political Thought: Aśoka, Shambhala, and the General Will' in Steven M Emmanuel (ed), *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy* (John Wiley & Sons 2013).

if derived from their supposedly different contribution, talent, and competence, can be seen as a source of jealousy that disrupts interpersonal harmony. Thus, extending the same treatment to all is more than a sign of recognising the fundamental value of people equally; it is also a means to reduce the incidence of workers having opposing interests and competing against each other. Harmony is considered better preserved when everyone is given the same treatment and working the same job under the same group of managers.

Wanting to work in a harmonious and supportive environment where their effort and hard work would be appreciated, the Burmese workers considered getting 'unreasonably' criticised as an unbearable insult. For example, a sewing section frontline worker, Soe Win Yan, said while she might still tolerate what she saw as 'favouritism,' if she thought she was doing well but her superior kept on criticising and reproaching her, she would consider it as grave unfairness that violates her boundaries. The high value that Burmese workers placed on appreciation and approval reflects their expectations about work satisfaction. Maintaining their work norms, Chinese managers gave priority to extrinsic incentives, such as overtime pay and bonuses, and intrinsic incentives, such as sacrifices for the collective good. However, the Burmese workers were looking for a different kind of intrinsic motivation — a feeling of appreciation within a harmonious work environment where everyone is treated equally.

As many Burmese workers favoured a work environment that offers equal opportunities and treatment for all, their reaction to acts of differential treatment violating their principles of fairness was rather strong. Out of concern for their ideas of fairness, the differential treatment perceived by Burmese workers sets the stage for their retaliation for 'unfair' outcomes, not only in the form of direct confrontation, but also more convert forms of retaliation involving passive resistance and withdrawal.[456] For example Kyi Kyi Han, a senior supervisor at the sewing section, said:

> 'If I get the same salary as others, I won't complain, but if I get less than others, I'll definitely complain to my superior and the administrative section.'[457]

In conclusion to this section, I argue that the principles of fairness embraced by Chinese managers seem to be based on equity as well as pragmatic concerns. They claimed that they provided extrinsic incentives to reward exceptional performance fairly, and that their pragmatic management philosophy allowed them to enforce rules in a flexible manner for workers who were considered to be valuable to the factory. However, the Burmese workers, who might have been influenced by socialist workplace practices and Buddhist egalitarian values, had their own ideas of fairness based on equal treatment and intrinsic rewards of appreciation and harmony instead.

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[456] Daniel P Skarlicki and Robert Folger, 'Retaliation in the Workplace : The Roles of Distributive ', (1997) 82 Journal of Applied Psychology 434; Constant D Beugré and Robert A Baron, 'Perceptions of Systemic Justice: The Effects of Distributive, Procedural, and Interactional Justice' (2001) 31 Journal of Applied Social Psychology 324.

[457] Interview 5, Burmese worker (senior supervisor).

Consequently, they viewed the differential treatment by Chinese managers as an oppressive form of 'favouritism' and developed negative feelings toward the practice.

3. Principles of Work Ethic

In capitalist production based on wage labour, the interest of the factory management and interest of the workers are almost constantly in conflict. Factories want lower wages, workers want higher wages; factories want to maximise work intensity and effort, workers do not; factories want productivity-maximising labour process incorporating monitoring and surveillance, workers want to enjoy more flexibility and freedom from control.[458] Generally, the expectations or policies that workers perceive to be effective for advancing their interests do not substantially overlap with the expectations or policies that factories perceive to be effective for maximising their profit.

My observations suggest that, as one might anticipate, this factory in Myanmar is no exception. Though relevant scholarly discussion tends to cast everything under the same brush, producing the homogenous image of capitalists as greedy exploiters and workers as exploited victims, in this section I intend to provide a more nuanced understanding of the conflict between Chinese managers and Burmese workers from the point of view of work ethic. Work ethic can be interpreted as the rules of conduct

[458] Samuel Arnold, 'Capitalism, Class Conflict, and Domination' (2017) 31 Socialism and Democracy 106.

dictated by an organisation in overseeing behaviour and actions of employees to ensure they abide by the determined principles.[459] Taking a broader sense of the term, it refers to the way in which we conceptualise and view work, as well as the relationship between economic necessity, individual happiness, and societal goals.[460] The varying work ethic of members in multicultural work environments can pose challenges, particularly since the members are expected to be flexible and appreciate the diversity of cultures.[461]

On the issue of work ethic, there are basically two contrasting views. The 'culturalist' view is based on the so-called culturally specific aspects, suggesting there is significant impact of 'culture,' such as national culture, religious culture, and philosophical culture, on individual work values.[462] For example, there are Chinese scholars who argue that the Chinese tradition strongly influences work ethic in China, as 'ascetic beliefs in modesty, faith, harmony with nature and with the self' are valued.[463] The industrial capitalism view, quite differently, suggests modern work ethic primarily results from capitalist relations of production. It is argued that the rise of industrial capitalism was accompanied by a profound change in the concept of work, for

[459] Wan Norhasniah Wan Husin, 'Work Ethics from the Islamic Perspective in Malaysia' (2012) 29 European Journal of Social Sciences 51.
[460] Abbas J Ali, 'Rethinking Work Ethics' (2013) 23 International Journal of Commerce and Management 180.
[461] Jane E Flaherty, 'The Effects of Cultural Intelligence on Team Member Acceptance and Integration in Multinational Teams', *Handbook of Cultural Intelligence* (Routledge 2015).
[462] David A Ralston and others, 'The Impact of National Culture and Economic Ideology on Managerial Work Values: A Study of the United States, Russia, Japan and China' (1997) 28 Journal of International Business Studies 177; Andrew Eungi Kim and Gil Sung Park, 'Nationalism, Confucianism, Work Ethic and Industrialization in South Korea' (2003) 33 Journal of Contemporary Asia 37; Liana Giorgi and Catherine Marsh, 'The Protestant Work Ethic as a Cultural Phenomenon' (1990) 20 European Journal of Social Psychology 499.
[463] YT Chao, 'Culture and Work Organization: The Chinese Case' (1990) 25 International Journal of Psychology 583.

example Gutman argues in his work how the regularities and disciplines of factory labour was imposed on workers of pre-industrial America who had 'irregular and undisciplined work patterns.'[464]

I argue, however, that there is no need to pick a side, since these two seemingly opposing views are actually complementary. As I have discussed in the beginning of this thesis, the approach of 'culture' is this research is not about ethnic specificity, but rather about the interpretive contexts which may be brought on to locate and understand phenomena. Therefore, while I recognise the prevalent value system in the Chinese or Burmese way of thinking as an important layer of analysis, I consider the state of economic development and evolution of industrial capitalism to form the broader context of 'culture,' as I regard such as an inherent part of my analysis.

3.1 Chinese Managers' Work Ethic: 'Factory as Home'

Many scholars, both Chinese and Western, support a 'culturalist' explanation of Chinese people's work ethic with reference to aspects of Confucianism. For example, Yeh and Xu argue that implied by Confucius's dyadic role relations, Confucian work ethic prefers to respect hierarchy to attain harmony.[465] Wright notices how managers in Hong Kong frame their managerial role and obligations as paternal and expect their workers to live up to Confucian ideological expectations for a 'filial' Chinese

[464] David Rubinstein, 'Love and Work' (1978) 26 The Sociological Review 5; Herbert G Gutman, 'Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America , 1815-1919' (1973) 78 The American Historical Review 531.
[465] Quey Jen Yeh and Xiaojun Xu, 'The Effect of Confucian Work Ethics on Learning About Science and Technology Knowledge and Morality' (2010) 95 Journal of Business Ethics 111.

daughter.[466] Theorising based on their interpretation of Confucianism, Hofstede and Bond developed a dimension called 'Confucian Dynamism,' of which the associated values are perseverance, status-oriented relationships, thrift, and having a sense of shame.[467] While these scholars emphasise how work ethic is influenced by cultural elements, others have argued that such scholarship simplistically 'uses Orientalist cultural categories to understand Oriental economic outcomes.'[468] In their study of Chinese investment in Africa, Tang and Eom subscribe to the industrial capitalism view with an attempt to show that contemporary work ethic in China are not determined by culture, but instead moulded by the country's transition from a pre-capitalist manner of production to that of industrial capitalism.[469]

As I have argued, the 'culturalist' and industrial capitalist perspectives can be complementary. As much as I agree that industrial capitalism heavily influences the prevalent work ethic in contemporary China, I also acknowledge the influence of cultural nuances on the work ethic promoted by Chinese managers. For example, the Chinese manager of the sewing section described his expectations for the Burmese workers as follows:

> 'A good worker should at least treat the factory as his/her home ("*yichang weijia*"). If I were a worker and I would like to become a

[466] Melissa W Wright, 'Factory Daughters and Chinese Modernity: A Case from Dongguan' (2003) 34 Geoforum 291.
[467] Geert Hofstede and Michael Harris Bond, 'The Confucius Connection : From Cultural Roots' (1988) 16 Organizational Dynamics 4.
[468] Susan Greenhalgh, 'De-Orientalizing the Chinese Family Firm' (1994) 21 American Ethnologist 746.
[469] Xiaoyang Tang and Janet Eom, 'Time Perception and Industrialization: Divergence and Convergence of Work Ethics in Chinese Enterprises in Africa' (2019) 238 China Quarterly 461.

> manager in the future, I would like to learn more, so I would be able to return more to the company. Always be motivated and ambitious, that's the key.'[470]

The Mandarin Chinese word '*jia*' as in '*yichang weijia*' ('factory as home') has multiple meanings. In addition to the meaning of 'home,' it also means 'family'. With reference to the study conducted by Kamoche and Siebers on Chinese investment in Africa, and by Po-Keung Ip on Chinese state-owned enterprises, their observed image corresponds to how Chinese management in this factory perceived and ran the work environment like a Chinese model of family. Echoing my previous discussion about Chinese managers adherence to a 'strict parent' view of leadership, scholars argue that Chinese managers are paternalistic in their approach, believing that as 'seniors' they need to take care of the workers, teaching them knowledge, and providing welfare, while in return the workers as 'juniors' are expected to reciprocate by working hard in a loyal and self-motivated manner, sacrificing their free time when necessary.[471] Although the word '*jia*' carries different meanings depending on context, it almost always implies togetherness and sacrifice, and consequently, the Burmese workers were expected to subscribe to a strong sense of belonging and act in the factory's best interest.

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[470] Interview 40, Chinese manager.

[471] Yen-chen Su, 'The Relationship between Confucian Ethics and Industrial and Commercial Enterprises (儒家道德與工商企業之關係)' (Tunghai University 2005); Kamoche and Siebers (n 10); Po-Keung Ip, 'Business Ethics and a State-Owned Enterprise in China' (2003) 12 Business Ethics: A European Review 64.

The concept of 'family as home' appears to be a 'culturalist' perspective, however, there are a few aspects of Chinese managers' work attitudes that reflect the influence of industrial capitalism. For example, industrial capitalism stems from the employment of wage labour, and on various occasions, the Chinese managers emphasised how individuals, like profit-seeking enterprises, work only for pecuniary gains. As a result of certain beliefs such as, '[We] enter the workforce to make money, and we are always searching for ways to earn more,' 'workers are human beings, and we all work for money,' and even 'there is no motivation without money,' Chinese managers usually relied on extrinsic incentives to motivate, control, and discipline the Burmese workers, rather than intrinsic incentives framed through the lens of self-determination theory which are based on satisfying people's needs to feel competent and self-reliant.[472] It was rare for them to give positive verbal feedback to workers regarding their efforts or performance. Efforts were rarely made to increase workers' job satisfaction, to enhance their sense of self-efficacy, and to encourage their intrinsic motivation to complete tasks.

Even though Chinese managers appeared to think of extrinsic rewards as the only important source of motivation, influenced by their work ethic of 'factory as home' they took a seemingly contradictory view that Burmese workers had an excessive sense of entitlement towards extrinsic rewards. To them, responsible employees work for a salary, but do not become fixated on it and do not make 'excessive' demands. Moreover, employees should understand that the boss pays the salary because he is

[472] E Deci and R Ryan, 'The "What" and "Why" of Goal Pursuits: Human Needs and the Self-Determination of Behavior' (2000) 11 Psychological Inquiry 227.

making a profit, and they should work very hard for the boss before asking for a raise or promotion. Given their views on pecuniary rewards, the Chinese managers were critical of the Burmese workers' request for entitlements and benefits. The workers were perceived by them as being selfish for putting their desire for reward before the interests of the company:

> 'People here want money before they know anything. I'm not happy about this. My beliefs are different from theirs. I think you should contribute first, then get your reward. If you don't do your part, how can you get your reward? Let's say we're supposed to leave work at eight p.m., but if you start cleaning up ten minutes early, I'm not happy. I have to be responsible to the boss because I'm managing so many people.'[473]

To the Burmese workers, and possibly to many Westerners as well, it may be reasonable to start tidying things up a few minutes beforehand, so they can be out of the door when the work hours end. They might think of leaving work on time, like applying for leave and requesting for a raise, as a fundamental right. The exercise of those 'rights,' however, was frowned upon, since according to the Chinese management, a factory is a 'home' or 'family' where workers develop a sense of belonging and are willing to subordinate their personal desires to the greater good. In some ways, Chinese managers' work ethic of 'factory as home' reflects 'collectivistic'

[473] Interview 40, Chinese manager.

tendencies. Endorsing an interdependent view of intrinsic motivation that is different from the Western assumptions of self-determination theory, Chinese managers expected their workers to be motivated through striving for collective success and acting in accordance with choices made on behalf of all members.[474] Taking on a 'factory as home' mentality means prioritising the interests of the 'home,' while keeping in mind that personal and collective interests are inextricably linked. Therefore, while it is understood that Burmese workers are driven by financial motivation, exercising personal choice within a group context by asserting the right to financial rewards and working according to contract hours are considered egocentric behaviours that place self-interest above the needs of the group. Instead, workers should focus their attention on contributing to the 'home' and helping it achieve its goals.

It is important to note that the Chinese managers' work ethic of 'factory as home' is not just an expectation for the Burmese workers; it is also reflected in their own attitude towards their own work. In her study of Chinese investments in Africa, Ching Kwan Lee notices how Chinese managers deploy a narrative of hardship tolerance to draw a moral boundary between them and non-Chinese workers, as they articulated a belief that work is about developing a feeling of absolute obligation and making sacrifices to overcome poverty and live a good life in the future.[475] Similar to the Chinese managers in Ching Kwan Lee's study, the Chinese managers in this factory

[474] Martin S Hagger, Panagiotis Rentzelas and Nikos LD Chatzisarantis, 'Effects of Individualist and Collectivist Group Norms and Choice on Intrinsic Motivation' (2014) 38 Motivation and Emotion 215.
[475] Ching Kwan Lee, *The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labor, and Foreign Investment in Africa* (University of Chicago Press 2017).

lived a life of confinement separated from their family, and their personal lives including meals were organised collectively by the factory. As they viewed their 'frugal, monastic, and reclusive lifestyle' (in the words of Ching Kwan Lee) as the price for earning a higher salary and having a better life in the future, Burmese workers were expected to adopt a similar mentality — one of being willing to work hard and make sacrifice. Hence, the Burmese workers' demands for increased financial rewards were seen as a sign of their inability to tolerate hardship and delay gratification.

The narrative of 'factory as home' largely serves management interest and has been used as an ideological tactic by Chinese factories throughout the historical development of industrial capitalism in modern China to harness workers to production targets. During China's pre-reform socialist era, many Chinese state-owned enterprises tried to indoctrinate workers with strong sense of loyalty and belonging. Arguably influenced by socialist ethos, 'factory as home' was a common slogan used to promote adherence to collective norms, goals, and commitment towards group welfare.[476] After China began transitioning towards market economy, 'factory as home' remained a popular ideological strategy in many enterprises, including foreign-invested private enterprises,[477] and workers were expected to shoulder responsibility as members of the tight-knit 'family' to help the factory progress .[478] Since Taiwan, a capitalist and ethnic Chinese society, also witnessed a

[476] Huaiyin Li, 'Worker Performance in State-Owned Factories in Maoist China: A Reinterpretation' (2016) 42 Modern China 377.

[477] For example in Taiwanese-invested Chinese factories: David C Schak, 'Taiwanese Labour Management in China' (1997) 19 Employee Relations 365.

[478] Gang Feng, 'The "Institutional Weaknesses" of Labor Unions and Their Formative Contexts (企业工会的"制度性弱势"及其形成背景)' (2006) 26 Chinese Journal of Sociology 81.

similar 'Factory as Home' movement in the 1980s with the Taiwanese government actively supporting employer paternalism,[479] it is probable that the concept of 'factory as home' is not exclusively a socialist idea, but is rather a result of Chinese socio-cultural values combined with industrial capitalism.

3.2 Burmese Workers' Work Ethics: Buddhist and Socialist Influence

Many scholars who advocate a 'culturalist' explanation for work ethic have focused on analysing religious influences. Hill suggests that pursuant to Buddhist teachings, workers should be fully committed, skilful, and earnest in their professions, while the management should provide secure employment and demonstrate generosity without excessive attachment to wealth and property.[480] The influence of Buddhist ethics on the fabric of Burmese society, including business and work ethic, is likewise acknowledged by Burmese scholars, for instance Soe Wynn Naing argues that in Myanmar, business is viewed as part of the social order, and there must be a fair balance between benefit for the business and benefit for the general public.[481]

Profound Buddhist influence aside, as I have discussed in the previous section, the state of manufacturing industry in Myanmar is rooted in the country's socialist past. The government had been the largest employer in Myanmar for many decades, and

[479] Sungsidh Piriyarangsan and Kanchada Poonpanich, 'Labour Institutions in an Export-Oriented Country: A Case Study of Thailand', *Workers, Institutions and Economic Growth in Asia* (International Institute for Labour Studies 1994).
[480] John S Hill, 'Religion and the Shaping of East Asian Management Styles: A Conceptual Examination' (2007) 8 Journal of Asia-Pacific Business 59.
[481] Soe Wynn Naing, 'Ethics in Myanmar Business' (2015) 13 Journal of the Myanmar Academy of Arts and Science 95; Nang Theingi Maw, 'The Important Role of Reverence in Myanmar Society' (2016) 6 Yadanabon University Research Journal 1.

today it continues to provide a significant share of employment, with government employees probably accounting for 10 to 20 per cent of all employed people in Myanmar.[482] The state-owned sector of the economy was established during the socialist period, during which all industries except agriculture were nationalised and foreign investment and industrialists were expelled. With Burmese socialism aimed at progressing towards a welfare state intending social justice and economic plenty for all citizens,[483] certain moral economic standards were established during that period, for example, as a result of government intervention in agriculture, rice was supplied to the government at low prices, allowing the government to provide rice to its employees as payment in kind.[484]

Probably because the Buddhist and socialist influence in work ethics persisted in Myanmar, many Burmese workers in this factory experienced feelings of entitlement towards employee benefits, despite their generally compliant approach towards management. Since they felt they were entitled to holidays and leave, they easily developed feelings of resentment when such benefits were denied. A junior supervisor reported feeling depressed after a Chinese manager, invoking the fact that the factory had a busy schedule, refused her request for a day off to attend to a family issue. The supervisor recalled how frustrated she was once when she fell ill and requested a day off, but the Chinese manager told her that she was not entitled to a

[482] Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung, 'Beyond Armed Resistance: Ethnonational Politics in Burma (Myanmar)' (2011) <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/beyond-armed-resistance-ethnonational-politics-burma-myanmar> accessed 12 June 2021.
[483] Laurence D Stifel, 'Burmese Socialism: Economic Problems of the First Decade' (1972) 45 Pacific Affairs 60.
[484] Toshihiro Kudo and Konosuke Odaka, 'Post-Colonial Industrialisation in Myanmar' in Konosuke Odaka (ed), *The Myanmar Economy: Its Past, Present and Prospects* (Springer 2015).

day off during her probation period as a new supervisor. The tensions were not restricted to individual workers, but also occurred on a wider scale. An employee of the storage area recalled a time when many workers wanted to celebrate Myanmar's Independence Day, a national holiday on the fourth of January, but the factory decided to remain open that day and designated another day as a holiday instead. 'They didn't understand our situation,' complained the worker, and she remembered that everyone back then was mumbling and yelling, all feeling angry because they 'wanted their right, their right to celebrate Independence Day.'

Another important part of this feeling of entitlement concerns the wage and work hours arrangements. On the fifth day of every month, since it was still rare for citizens of Pakokku to have a bank account, salary was paid in cash. As the number of workers in the factory approached one thousand, it was a painfully slow process, yet many workers considered it their right to receive their salary on time. Another example was provided by Aye Min Kyat, a security officer. She was concerned that factory workers might be in danger when travelling home late at night after work, and she hoped the factory could reduce the overtime work or at least inform them in advance of the number of overtime hours, so they could arrange transportation or ask their family to pick them up.

Although Burmese workers had expectations regarding their employee benefits and work arrangements, the law does not play a significant role in shaping their entitlement perceptions. A presentation regarding labour rights was made to Burmese

workers when representatives from the labour department visited the factory to distribute booklets. Apart from a few senior supervisors who had some understanding of the basic labour rights protected by law, most workers were ignorant of these rights. There might be a rough understanding that they are entitled to leave if a relative dies or if the village celebrates a festival, and that they are entitled to double pay for extra work, but they were uncertain if these rights are legally recognised. In spite of not accepting all policies and decisions of the Chinese management, the Burmese workers' sense of entitlement seems to be based on concerns for their self-interest derived from long-held beliefs they hold regarding work, rather than an understanding of their legally recognised labour rights.

While the Burmese workers' sense of entitlement regarding employee benefits seems reasonable to many observers, given the Chinese managers' expectations that their employees tolerate hardship and treat the 'factory as home,' it is not difficult to imagine that the Burmese workers' sense of entitlement was regarded with disapproval. As I observed in this factory, my observation resembles the findings of Ching Kwan Lee's study of Chinese-invested enterprises in African countries, in which she noted that socialist ethos influenced the African workers to expect standards of fair return to their labour, yet the Chinese managers there had basically rejected socialist practices in favour of their own concepts of work ethic emphasising devotion to work and willingness to make sacrifices without concomitant demands for rights, rewards, or privileges.[485]

[485] Lee, 'Raw Encounters: Chinese Managers, African Workers and the Politics of Casualization in Africa's Chinese Enclaves' (n 3).

As suggested by scholars that Chinese managers in Africa see themselves solve the problem of diverging work ethic by imparting their work ethic and disciplines to Africans workers to match the requirements of industrial capitalism,[486] I observe that a similar phenomenon was happening in this factory. Ms. Ying, the sewing section Chinese manager, recalled that a few years ago when the factory first opened, most workers having just started their position in the factory were reluctant to work overtime, even if they were offered double pay for the assigned extra hours. Feeling aggrieved by the factory's 'relentless' demand for overtime hours, some workers even chose to quit their job:

> 'In the past, whenever they [the Burmese workers] felt like they didn't want to work overtime, they would resign. They thought working eight hours a day was already very tiring.'[487]

As Tang and Eom note, overtime work until late at night or on weekends, adherence to punctuality, and the emphasis on efficiency and productivity of time are all characteristics of work ethic under industrial capitalism.[488] Although the Burmese workers initially saw the eight-hour work day as 'tiring' and wanted a right to 'reasonable work hours,' throughout the years, their view of overtime work gradually changed, and as Mr. Chun the general manager pointed out, most of them even began

[486] Tang and Eom (n 469); Lee, 'Raw Encounters: Chinese Managers, African Workers and the Politics of Casualization in Africa's Chinese Enclaves' (n 3).
[487] Interview 46, Chinese manager.
[488] Tang and Eom (n 469).

to request for overtime work. Ms. Ying also noticed the change and said she felt very happy about it. She praised the workers for becoming 'much more willing to work overtime' and 'accepting of the factory's arrangement.' As Ms Ying described, 'Now, no matter how many extra hours we demand from them and shift their working time slots, they're fine with it.' She tried to account for this change:

> 'After working with us for a while, the workers' mentality changed. Now they know how to apply for leave and they ask for overtime. They're accustomed to making more money and having a better life now.'[489]

It is rather unlikely that the Burmese workers became enthusiastic about the long hours that they were expected to work. Yet, as they began to realise the benefits of earning a higher income and living a better lifestyle, their perceptions of work began to change. It occurred to me after observing factory operations for months that despite the impending deadlines and immense pressure to meet production targets, most workers did not appear to resent overtime work. In the course of my discussions and interviews with the workers, there were very few complaints regarding overtime work. Overtime work hours were not marked by open grievances, and there were occasional conversations between workers just like normal working hours. As described by Myint Man, a junior supervisor, the workers might want to take some rest during public holidays, but they were 'quite happy about overtime work.' Sharing

[489] Interview 46, Chinese manager.

her personal experience, Kyaw Mon Ei said she felt the long work hours were 'too much' for her when she first joined the factory, but after a few years, she said she 'felt better' because she 'learnt the work process' and increasingly appreciated the fact that she could receive double pay for the extra hours of work.

To sum up this section, I argue that certain aspects of the Chinese managers' work ethic, such as the importance ascribed to productivity and extrinsic rewards, can be explained by China's development of industrial capitalism. Yet, the implications of cultural elements were also apparent, given how management-labour relations were construed by the Chinese managers as reciprocal parent-child relations and that the workplace was construed as a 'home' in which the 'filial' duty of commitment and loyalty was expected to be practised. The Burmese workers, despite their tendency to demonstrate compliance towards the Chinese managers, had a strong sense of what they should be entitled to, of which was not necessarily linked to the legal protection of labour rights. Yet, their perception of work was slowly transformed to become in line with the mentality of industrial capitalism. Although some fundamental differences remain, as the managerial practices and workplace arrangements are transplanted from China to Myanmar, in the future there will probably be a continued convergence of work ethic of Chinese managers and Burmese workers towards the prevalent values suitable for a capitalist mode of production.

4. Conclusion

Through various examples, this chapter demonstrates that problems can emerge when individuals come to the collaboration with different principles of reciprocity, fairness, and work ethic. Although the Chinese managers were guided by equity norms that they tried to quantify contribution and relied on extrinsic rewards to motivate their Burmese staff, they showed concern to the concrete social rules and content of human relationships. They distributed resources and attention to their staff in differential manner, and they expected their staff to reciprocate their 'care' by tolerating hardship and treating the factory like their 'home.' The Burmese workers, on the other hand, generally had more flexible views towards social norms, and they placed more value on attaining harmony and happiness through a work culture of equal treatment, appreciation, and protection of workers' rights and welfare. The contrasting ideas about reciprocity, fairness, and work ethic between Chinese managers and Burmese workers became a major factor affecting the quality of interpersonal relationships at this multicultural workplace.

Whereas I acknowledge the cultural basis for the norms and principles espoused by the factory members, I suggest that these human cognitive aspects are dynamic that they do change over time, as people collaborating in such a multicultural workplace acquire new information, expose themselves to new ideas, and negotiate their perspectives in face of potential and actual frictions. As the ones in power, the Chinese managers could define the range of entities that deserved moral consideration and impose their standards on the Burmese workers, like how the Burmese workers' reciprocal behaviour was conceived as a moral crisis problem that required a

fundamental policy-oriented solution. It is a common phenomenon for the management of an organisation to establish and reinforce an organisational climate of which the source of ethical norms stems from strict rules promulgated by the management, intending to change the organisation from a perceived climate of 'self-interest' which underlines a more individualistic and independent way of dealing with ethical issues, to a climate of 'friendship' with more collective and interdependent way to dealing with things.[490]

The incident involving Mr. Mei, however, demonstrates that such approach may overshadow the more individualised and nuanced aspects of morality, friendship, and social networks.[491] Replacing the endogenously-driven process of interacting for reciprocity, fairness, and work ethic with an exogenously-driven system may have effects on workplace relationships that prove to restrict the possibilities for empowerment, since an important part of empowerment is to make available opportunities to perceive and respond to the environment, such that individuals may establish intrinsic motivation and develop trust in an environment where positive social relationships flourish.[492]

[490] Stefano Pagliaro and others, 'On the Effects of Ethical Climate(s) on Employees' Behavior: A Social Identity Approach' (2018) 9 Frontiers in Psychology 1.
[491] Meral Elçi and Lütfihak Alpkan, 'The Impact of Perceived Organizational Ethical Climate on Work Satisfaction' (2009) 84 Journal of Business Ethics 297.
[492] Pennie G Foster-Fishman and Christopher B Keys, 'The Person/Environment Dynamics of Employee Empowerment: An Organizational Culture Analysis' (1997) 25 American Journal of Community Psychology 345.

CHAPTER EIGHT – THE PEOPLE IN BETWEEN

In this chapter, I explore the roles of Burmese supervisors and Chinese-Burmese interpreters as the intermediaries, the 'people in between,' in the cross-cultural work environment of Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd. Owing to cultural differences and lack of lingua franca between Chinese and Burmese members, the factory appointed these intermediaries to facilitate work communication across boundaries and smoothen production process. This chapter analyses their identification and relationship with different factory members, focusing on the way they adjusted to management expectations as they took measures to fulfil their duties. The chapter begins with a discussion of the Burmese supervisors, analysing how their work behaviour suggests they had become acculturated into the values and norms of Chinese managers, while trying to maintain close relationship with their frontline staff. The chapter then discusses the Chinese-Burmese interpreters to analyse their background and distinct sense of identity. It describes their experiences of spanning intraorganisational boundaries to function as the engine of the cross-cultural environment, and their strategies to contain dissatisfactions and maintain workplace stability on behalf of the Chinese management.

1. Burmese Supervisors: The Acculturated Representatives

As a common strategy used by multinational corporations operating in foreign countries, scholars have identified some benefits derived from staff localisation. For

an industry with intense competition such as the garment manufacturing industry, employing local supervisors can harden the company's competitiveness by leveraging both managerial and operational costs. Compared with expatriate supervisors, local employees are more sensitive and perceptive of the local environment, therefore localisation allows the business to gain access to more localised market knowledge and insights,[493] and local managers may apply their know-how to engage with the local environment and mobilise appropriate inducements or threats to negotiate a desirable outcome.[494] Moreover, local supervisors are natural interpreters of the local environment, able to communicate effectively with local employees, decrease intergroup conflict and status disparity, improve cohesion and organisational identity, and enhance employee morale and commitment.[495] It is suggested that localisation of staff is helpful to reduce cultural friction and to confer local legitimacy on a company, and as Luo and Shenkar have argued, local supervisors can act as 'lubricants' and should be collectively used if a company seeks to obtain a more effective and efficient remedy for friction.[496]

[493] Lingfang Fayol-Song, 'Reasons behind Management Localization in MNCs in China' (2011) 17 Asia Pacific Business Review 455; Petison Petison and Lalit M Johri, 'Localization Drivers in an Emerging Market: Case Studies from Thailand' (2008) 46 Management Decision 1399.
[494] Anthony Ferner, 'US Multinationals and Collective Representation in European Subsidiaries: Institutional Resistance and Accommodation' in Sylvie Contrepois and others (eds), *Globalizing Employment Relations: Multinational Firms and Central and Eastern Europe Transitions* (Palgrave Macmillan 2011).
[495] Yi Yang and Yong Suhk Pak, 'Staff Localization Strategy and Host Country Nationals' Turnover Intention' (2022) 33 International Journal of Human Resource Management 1916; Anthony Ferner, 'The Underpinnings of "bureaucratic" Control Systems: HRM in European Multinationals' (2000) 37 Journal of Management Studies 521.
[496] Yadong Luo and Oded Shenkar, 'Toward a Perspective of Cultural Friction in International Business' (2011) 17 Journal of International Management 1 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.intman.2010.09.001>.

Though local supervisors share ethnic backgrounds, values, languages, customs, and norms with the local population, all of which are meant to contribute to their identification and sense of belonging with local staff, because of their dual identities, one with local staff and the other with headquarters management, they are often caught between conflicting responsibilities and expectations.[497] In their studies of Singaporean middle managers employed in Swedish subsidiaries in Singapore, Selmer and De Leon noticed that as the local Singaporean managers were exposed to Swedish work norms and values from the Swedish executives and the organisational culture of the parent organisation, through a process that they termed 'organisational acculturation,' the Singaporean managers' work values gradually diverged from traditional Chinese management norms and organisational practices favoured by other Singaporeans, and instead showed a close resemblance to Swedish organisational culture and work values.[498]

In their study of Chinese local senior executives employed in subsidiaries of multinational corporations, Zhang, George, and Chan also suggest that in the case of local supervisors coping with duelling identities, when they identify more with the headquarters' management which represents a more prestigious status, their identification with local staff may be reduced, because this local identification can potentially be 'a relatively stigmatised or disadvantaged identity.'[499] Experiencing

[497] Yan Zhang, Jennifer M George and Tsang Sing Chan, 'The Paradox of Dueling Identities: The Case of Local Senior Executives in MNC Subsidiaries' (2006) 32 Journal of Management 400.
[498] Jan Selmer and Corinna De Leon, 'Organizational Acculturation in Foreign Subsidiaries' (1993) 35 The International Executive 321; Jan Selmer and Corinna De Leon, 'Parent Cultural Control through Organizational Acculturation: HCN Employees Learning New Work Values in Foreign Business Subsidiaries' (1996) 17 Journal of Organizational Behavior Management 557.
[499] Zhang, George and Chan (n 497).

conflict of identities, it is therefore argued that locally recruited supervisors working for multinational corporations may suffer from a loss of identity, as their work-related attitudes and behaviour may result in social exclusion — whether from the global parent or from the community in which they are expected to represent managerial authority.[500] Morgan and Kristensen's study is another example that highlights the limitations of local managers in the arenas of conflict management. While some may become 'subversive strategists' allied with the local employees to fulfil their wider corporate responsibilities, others may end up as subsidiary 'clones' with little ability to leverage the specific assets that the institutional context offers.[501]

The recruitment of Burmese workers as supervisors at this factory represents the owner's attempt to implement staff localisation. This section examines the Burmese supervisors as a unique group of local employees situated in the middle of the workplace hierarchy below Chinese managers but above other Burmese employees. I examine how the Burmese supervisors interpreted their role, whose interests that they identified with, and how they performed their role in this Chinese-managed factory.

1.1 Meeting Expectations and Maintaining Relationships

The Burmese supervisors at Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd., as I have explained in previous chapters, possessed structural authority over the workplace by

[500] Carla CJM Millar and Chong Ju Choi, 'Worker Identity, the Liability of Foreignness, the Exclusion of Local Managers and Unionism: A Conceptual Analysis' (2008) 21 Journal of Organizational Change Management 460.
[501] Glenn Morgan and Peer Hull Kristensen, 'The Contested Space of Multinationals: Varieties of Institutionalism, Varieties of Capitalism' (2006) 59 Human Relations 1467; Ferner (n 494).

implementing orders of the management and taking on supervision and problem-solving duties. They frequently interacted with the frontline workers and exerted influence on them throughout the production process. Perhaps because supervisors were held accountable for the performance of frontline staff under their supervision, they tended to adopt the Chinese manager's approach and, to a certain extent, became acculturated to some of the Chinese manager's work norms of emphasising the use of rules and policies to achieve 'systematic management.'

Having been given the authority to enforce factory rules and police the work environment, the supervisors accepted their role as rule-enforcers, as they faithfully performed their duties to monitor frontline workers and maintain discipline on the shop floor. In addition to actively enforcing the rules, they criticised the workers for failing to meet their expectations and referred 'repeat offenders' to Chinese management for disciplinary action. Also, they would notify management if they observed seriously deviant behaviour. The supervisors' dedication to maintaining order has led them to defend the legitimacy of rules and to appear defensive whenever frontline workers question their reasonableness and content. Pa Pa Myo, a supervisor in the sewing section, once received a complaint from a frontline worker concerning the prohibition of food and beverages during work hours. In refusal to entertain the complaint, Pa Pa Myo simply stated, 'The rules are the rules, you must obey.' As she was authorised to enforce the rules, she expected obedience from those to whom the rules applied, despite their neglect of human dimension and individual happiness, both of which were valued by frontline workers. Pa Pa Myo's reply to the complaining

worker, 'This is the job we have; I understand it involves a lot of stress, but you need to get used to it as all of us did,' clearly illustrates her indifference towards frontline staff expectations. By making the claim that other workers had successfully handled the stress, she was relying on peer pressure to trivialise individual workers' feelings.

Besides requesting frontline workers to conform to group norms, some supervisors prioritised the collective interest of the factory over the needs of individual workers in order to harness their productivity. Driven by management expectations and influenced by Chinese work ethic, the supervisors were task-oriented and expected workers to submit to group targets. One of the supervisors at the sewing section, Win Moe Khin, recalled a time when the frontline workers were supposed to produce five hundred bras, but they were only able to complete four hundred and fifty. As a result of the inability to meet the target, Win Moe Khin interrogated her staff, who informed her that they had tried hard but ran into many problems, such as sewing machine malfunction and late delivery of garment panels. Despite this, Win Moe Khin remained unconvinced by those explanations, and she kept pushing her staff to work harder, which made them feel frustrated and resentful of her.

Prioritising organisational goals, some supervisors used strategies to exercise control over the frontline workers to restrain their expression of individual voice. For example, as the intermediary between frontline workers and managers, certain supervisors acted like a firewall to filter and block messages. May Khin, a frontline worker, recalled that when some of her peers wanted to abstain from overtime work for a day,

they informed the supervisor of their line, yet they were met with a stern face and were told they should inform the Chinese managers themselves. Since many frontline workers shied away from speaking to the Chinese managers directly, the supervisor's refusal to deliver the message was effectively deterring frontline workers from meeting their needs. Even more so, the supervisors would use their power to implicitly punish workers who refused assigned extra hours. As May Khin recalled, 'Even though they say the frontline workers aren't forced to work overtime, if some of their staff really don't work overtime, they'll just ignore them.' Despite an illusion of autonomy, overtime was in effect mandatory, as compliance was the only way to avoid the supervisors' soft coercion.

Different reasons may cause a factory worker, especially a woman, not to want to work overtime. Myanmar has a cultural tradition that women belong at home. Even if they have a job outside the home, Burmese women maintain their assigned role as housewives. [502] However, the supervisors showed limited concern for frontline workers' individual circumstances. By implicitly punishing those who refused assigned extra hours, the supervisors yielded to the management's demand of putting pressure on the workers to achieve maximum productivity. Their use of deliberate neglect was a passive-aggressive means of control that was subtler, yet to the *'anade'* influenced Burmese staff who were used to indirect forms of communication, this was probably as powerful as direct reprimand.

[502] Nyein Su Mon and Eisuke Saito, 'Going Upstream: The Experiences of Women in Leadership in Myanmar' (2018) 48 Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education 299.

Why did the Burmese supervisors appear to follow many of the Chinese managers' leadership and governance practices? Since this study is based on a contextual approach, I argue that the strength and the specific expressions of values by Burmese supervisors depends much on relational and situational aspects, and a consideration of power relations is crucial. In this factory, work relationships were largely defined by members' relative positions in the organisational hierarchy and characterised by strong hierarchical distinctions. Situated at a level higher than frontline staff, the supervisors were recruited to govern the workplace on behalf of Chinese management. They were entitled to a higher salary and rule-enforcement authority, and they were expected to bridge the management-frontline communication divide. The leader-follower distance between them and the Chinese managers was narrower. For example, when they failed to meet work expectations, the Chinese managers would reprimand them directly and request that they reflect, much like parents disciplining their children. Therefore, the supervisors had an obviously privileged position. Given the significant difference in the way frontline staff and supervisors communicated and identified with the management, over time, the supervisors began to relate more to their special status and embrace their role-based identity.

Besides accommodating role-based expectations, I argue that Burmese supervisors were influenced by harmony-oriented '*anade*' when interpreting their identity at work. As Bekker have suggested, the meaning of '*anade*' changes with changes in status.[503] When the Burmese workers, as frontline staff, interact with peers of the same status,

[503] Bekker (n 234).

'*anade*' is acted out as empathy and sensitivity to other people's needs, and thus as conformity to the norms and practices of the peer group. Yet, with the elevation of status to that of privileged supervisors, the way that the supervisors made sense of and acted upon '*anade*' changed. In the process of establishing their leadership authority, they began to identify more with the Chinese management. As a consequence, their '*anade*,' when felt with reference to the lower status frontline staff, became feelings of pity or embarrassment at demanding too much. Conformity was essential only towards Chinese managers, since they were recipients of '*anade*' in forms of respect, deference, and obedience.[504] So, being well aware of their roles and responsibilities, they adopted or at least tried to adopt the work values of the Chinese managers.

Take Nhing Myo Kin, a supervisor at the cutting section, as an example. Although he was experiencing considerable stress due to Chinese managers' work demands, he tried to tolerate the hardship, restrain his negative feelings, and appear happy in front of others, of which both the influence of *'anade,'* and the work ethic of 'factory as home' emphasising individual sacrifice and collective interest, was apparent:

> 'In my role as supervisor it's my responsibility to be happy, because I want to stay in the factory for years to come and improve it... If I look stressed, the other workers will ask me what's wrong. I'm the leader

[504] It might be the case that the Burmese supervisors were trying to give answers they thought I was expecting, rather than what they might really think, since it is a practice of '*anade*' to give polite and 'appropriate' answers. Still, the difference was very clear that they were focusing more on their job to please the Chinese managers, rather than their Burmese peers.

> of my section, so if I'm stressed, the workers won't want to work. If I'm doing well, the workers will too.'[505]

It is evident from Nhing Myo Kin's words that he had a feeling of belonging to the factory and viewed it as more than just a workplace. Because of his loyalty and devotion to the factory, he desired to make the factory a better place, and he was willing to suppress his personal feelings and needs to maintain group cohesion. Similarly, other Burmese supervisors indicated a willingness to endure job-related stresses and hardships. They spoke about their strong sense of responsibility towards their jobs, suggesting that difficulties were an integral part of their job, and that they were prepared to work hard and make sacrifices. According to Min Yan Aung, a senior supervisor, when he first began working here, he was afraid of interacting with the Chinese managers, but after working here for a long time he gradually came to know and understand more about the Chinese managers, and it became much easier for him to get along with them. It is likely that it took a considerable amount of time for Burmese supervisors to become accustomed to their roles and acclimated to the Chinese management approach and work ethic.

On the other hand, I have also found that the Burmese supervisors did not simply act in the exact same way as the Chinese managers. While they were directly responsible to the management, they still displayed behaviour at work that demonstrated they shared some similar goals and expectations with the frontline workers. They did not

[505] Interview 28, Burmese worker (junior supervisor).

identify completely with their work role, and they did not subscribe to the management's model of social order by keeping a hierarchical distance and separating themselves from the frontline workers.

While I was observing in the factory, I noticed that compared with Chinese managers, Burmese supervisors had relationships with the frontline staff that were more affect-based. During work hours, they often engaged in casual conversation with frontline workers. The conversations were usually light-hearted and done with ease. Moreover, supervisors demonstrated some individualised consideration for the frontline by providing emotional support, which included caring and listening to them. [506] For example, if a worker was absent, the supervisors would call him or her and inquire about his or her situation, and if a worker was sick, the supervisors would take the worker to the factory clinic and arrange for him or her to be taken to a nearby hospital for treatment. This does not imply that supervisors always engaged frontline workers in a people-oriented way, since a few frontline workers did complain that supervisors were sometimes too concerned with meeting production goals. It is nevertheless true that frontline staff had a much stronger and more personalised work relationship with their supervisors compared to Chinese managers.

As a result of their supervisors' affect-based behaviour, frontline workers tended to describe supervisors as nice, trustworthy individuals with whom they felt like friends.

[506] For discussion of individualised consideration, see Alannah E Rafferty and Mark A Griffin, 'Refining Individualized Consideration: Distinguishing Developmental Leadership and Supportive Leadership' (2006) 79 Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology 37.

Kyal Sin Mui, a frontline worker at the sewing section, described her supervisor and the frontline workers as being like friends that she would invite to her house and prepare food for them. Additionally, most frontline workers did not hesitate to seek guidance from their supervisors about work issues. The packaging section supervisor, Win Thin Nyint, suggested that when frontline workers wanted to voice out something to the factory, they would usually speak to him first, and he said it was because the frontline workers 'respected him a lot' that they would obey whatever advice he gave them.

Maintaining a relatively people-oriented approach with their frontline staff, the supervisors were more attentive than the Chinese managers when addressing the concerns of frontline workers. Besides formalistic rules and coercive disciplinary means, they used more informal strategies, such as meetings, private discussions, and casual conversations, to influence frontline workers' behaviour. Reference can be made to the concept of interactional justice, which describes the manner and extent to which people are treated with courtesy and respect during a conflict resolution process.[507] Consider as an example the junior supervisor of the sewing section, Phyo Wai Htett. Staff that were frequently late for work were not simply reprimanded and punished, but she attempted to persuade them with reason to be more punctual in the future. As Phyo Wai Htett tried to get her frontline employees to picture themselves in the shoes of the factory, she appeared to use a technique reminiscent of the 'thought work' conducted by Chinese managers:

[507] Russell Cropanzano, Cynthia A Prehar and Peter Y Chen, 'Using Social Exchange Theory to Distinguish Procedural from Interactional Justice' (2002) 27 Group and Organization Management 324.

> 'I meet with people who are late and try to understand their situation. All those latecomers listen to me closely when I talk to them. I told them I was very punctual as a worker, and I asked them what would happen if I, the supervisor, am also late, and if everyone in the factory is used to being late. They should understand the importance of punctuality, and when they do, they won't be late anymore.'[508]

As I have discussed previously, 'thought work' aims to awaken workers' sense of collective interest and their desire to work toward this interest. Despite that the Burmese supervisors might have learned some 'thought work' techniques, in contrast to Chinese managers' governance and rule enforcement approach which is characterised by a distant, task-oriented, and coercive attitude, Burmese supervisors displayed greater empathy, flexibility, and closeness to frontline workers. They were more likely to demonstrate sensitivity in their interactions and lend a human dimension to rules. For example, if a supervisor noticed that a frontline worker was suffering from a low mood and a significant decline in performance, the supervisor might speak to that worker to understand whether the worker was experiencing personal or family difficulties. In general, they were much more willing to listen to the explanations of frontline workers for rule deviations, and after carefully considering these explanations, they would often give workers a second chance, or inform Chinese

[508] Interview 24, Burmese worker (junior supervisor).

managers of such explanations so Chinese managers could make a more accurate and informed decision regarding the alleged rule deviation.

By demonstrating concern for the wellbeing of frontline workers and not keeping hierarchical distance from them, supervisors were often able to gain their compliance. Describing her staff as 'shy' and 'cooperative' who were willing to confess their 'mistakes,' Phyo Wai Htett, a junior supervisor, said after getting persuaded, her staff would usually show a change in their behaviour and begin to comply with the rules. Similarly, when Hen Kyein Kyein, a supervisor at the cutting section, noticed her staff were chatting with each other non-stop, she would try to persuade them to stay quiet and focus on work. As Hen Kyein Kyein described, there was no need for her to punish them, because they would usually listen to her and adjust their behaviour accordingly, except only in rare occasions which she would have to report the issue to the Chinese managers.

Along with similar culturally influenced ideas and expectations, what united supervisors and their frontline staff and led them to engage in mutually empathic and understanding ways of communicating appears to be their sense of identity as a Burmese people. Mon Myat Aye, a supervisor, described his approach to handling problems with his staff as influenced by the fact that they shared a common identity:

> 'The first thing, I have to meet that person, ask him what's happening.
> Then I try to talk to them, try to understand and speak in a better way

if they don't get it. After all we're Burmese people, I should handle the problem by myself.'[509]

What effect does identity have on people in cross-cultural work environments? It is argued that in such a work environment of foreign-invested enterprises, the presence of different ethnic groups, nationalities, cultures, and languages may prompt managers from host countries to identify themselves strongly as 'locals,' as the salience of out-groups can reinforce an individual's awareness of in-group identity.[510] The Burmese supervisors spent most of their careers in this Burmese subsidiary of a Chinese-owned business, working with colleagues who were mostly Burmese people hailing from the same city. It is therefore reasonable that they tended to see themselves and frontline staff as locals or the same group and, on the other hand, see Chinese expatriate managers as being part of an outgroup.

Examining issues of intergroup conflict from an identity-based perspective, Ho and Yeung argued that individuals who identify with one particular group are motivated to seek belonging in that group by ascribing to themselves characteristics of that group in comparison to those of out-groups and demonstrating behaviours that affirm their value at work.[511] Since the Burmese workers' concept of good leadership, governance, and social order is based on the idea that a leader is authoritative and fosters a people-

[509] Interview 20, Burmese worker (senior supervisor).
[510] Vernon L Allen, David A Wilder and Michael L Atkinson, 'Multiple Group Membership and Social Identity', *Studies in Social Identity* (Praeger Publishers 1983).
[511] Henry CY Ho and Dannii Y Yeung, 'Conflict between Younger and Older Workers: An Identity-Based Approach' (2021) 32 International Journal of Conflict Management 102.

oriented environment, contrary to the normative view of Chinese managers that workplace harmony is achieved through rule-based management and hierarchy-based processes, Burmese supervisors charged with overseeing production and enforcing hierarchy on behalf of Chinese managers were caught between competing ingroup and outgroup expectations. In order to adapt their behaviour to the in-group, it appears that the Burmese supervisors engaged in what Hogg and Terry termed, a process of self-categorisation of themselves,[512] producing normative behaviour based on a degree of cohesion, cooperation, and empathy.

Whereas self-categorisation may not always be a straightforward process, and individual association with collective identities can sometimes be ambiguous due to a person's subjective uncertainties, I argue that the human and personalised characteristic of Burmese supervisors, as distinct from Chinese managers, is indicative of their desire to meet some collective expectations of their ingroup —fellow Burmese frontline workers. As they sought to manage their frontline staff with personal influence and mediate workplace hierarchies, the supervisors were seeking to transcend their role-based identity to maintain their in-group personal identity among frontline workers.

1.2 Between Competing Expectations and Interests: How WCC Worked

[512] Michael A Hogg and Deborah J Terry, 'Social Identity and Self-Categorization Processes in Organizational Contexts' (2000) 25 Academy of Management Review 121.

As I have discussed in the previous subsections, the Burmese supervisors faced competing ideas related to work. They had to grapple internally, with their interpretations of work-oriented values and a sense of belonging to the Burmese, as well as externally, with demands and expectations from both sides. Although they tried hard to meet the needs of both sides and maintain a delicate balance between interests, their attempt to operationalise autonomy was constrained by prevailing power relations. With their organisationally assigned roles as the less powerful 'people in between,' I found that at some critical moments, it became necessary for them to align themselves with management interests and thus disidentify to some extent with the frontline workers. This was especially true for supervisors serving as WCC worker representatives, since they were supposed to represent frontline workers in negotiations with management regarding issues directly affecting their interests.

According to the SLDL, WCC is designed to resemble collective bargaining organisations, and worker representatives are elected by all workers to represent them to negotiate with management the conditions of employment related to occupational safety, health, welfare, and productivity.[513] As far as I noticed, the worker representatives of Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd understood their roles. For example, Aung Tung Han, a supervisor and a worker representative, explained how he thought it was his responsibility as representative to uncover workers' grievances, follow up

[513] Settlement of Labour Disputes Law ss. 3,3 & 5.

with investigations, and discuss with management in WCC meetings to formally address such grievances.

In practice, however, WCC's effectiveness in this factory was highly questionable. A clear indication is that there was a general sense of mistrust among frontline workers towards the worker representatives. Some frontline workers reported that the representatives were not helpful and that they had no idea how the representatives would solve problems. It appeared to them that the representatives were simply following management's instructions. These impressions are supported by the remarks of Thu Nyein Aye, a worker at the storage area. In the following excerpt, she describes her first-hand experience with the worker representatives:

> 'Although we tried to complain to them [worker representatives] about our needs, they said "Okay, we'll get to it later." It took them four or five months to get back to us, but they didn't bring the issue up. They held meetings, but they didn't follow through. They said they'd talk to the managers, but they didn't.'[514]

How might the supervisors' inaction or ineptitude be explained? Because of their positional power and work experience, the supervisors were more comfortable than frontline workers in explaining the work situation and communicating workers' needs to the management. As part of their desire to identify with the frontline workers

[514] Interview 16, Burmese worker (frontline).

and to respond to their expectations, some supervisors expressed a clear altruistic motive to speak and negotiate on their behalf. For example, Kyaw Thi Thi, a senior supervisor and worker representative, remembered when frontline workers complained to her that they were denied six days of paid casual leave:

> 'I wanted to see it from the workers' perspective. These six days usually aren't given to the workers. The Chinese managers don't want to give them to the workers. I felt frustrated and disappointed at the time, I wanted to go to the law department and get that handled. If Myanmar's law states that, I expect all people to be treated fairly.'[515]

Besides identifying strongly with the workers regarding what they should be entitled to, Kyaw Thi Thi was aware that paid casual leave was a right recognised by Myanmar's national laws, and she was determined to stand up for the rights of workers. As a result of her identifying with the frontline workers regarding their entitlements and her determination to fight for their rights, Kyaw Thi Thi came into conflict with the factory management. She described how, during a meeting of the WCC, the factory side dismissed her request immediately:

> 'At the meeting, the boss and the managers said, "If we give out a lot of holidays, that's going to affect the factory and the business, so I want you to look at it from my perspective. The Myanmar calendar for

[515] Interview 30, Burmese worker (senior supervisor).

> 2020 has a lot of holidays. Just look at it from my side. I'm not saying I'm not giving you the six days, but let's end this discussion and move on to more important things."'[516]

Feeling frustrated by the management's reaction to her complaint, eventually, Kyaw Thi Thi gave up her 'fight,' and she tried to explain her decision in this way:

> 'I was frustrated, because the right…I didn't get the right. But I had to agree with them. In this way, I'm probably also helping the workers. If the workers get their paid leave, that will destroy the business, the factory will shut down, and people will lose their jobs. I don't want that.'[517]

Kyaw Thi Thi's use of the Burmese term 'right' ('*a-hkwang*') here indicates that her belief about workers deserving paid casual leave was more than mere feelings of entitlement. She knew it was a clear right under the law and, in order to protect her own interest and that of her in-group fellow workers, she even considered seeking help from the authorities. Her internal tension was evident, since she said she experienced frustration over the management's rejection of her request. However, with role-based identity being relational in nature, in the specific situation of WCC meetings, Kyaw Thi Thi's role-based identity as a supervisor was activated amidst her confrontation with management that was driven by power relations. The

[516] Interview 30, Burmese worker (senior supervisor).
[517] Interview 30, Burmese worker (senior supervisor).

management's assertion that the entire business would be destroyed if workers were entitled to some paid holidays was undoubtedly an exaggeration, yet as a form of pressure, it was effective in engendering Kyaw Thi Thi's sense of responsibility to the factory's interests and long-term survival. Internalising the role-based expectations placed on her, she parroted the management narrative, as if she was speaking on behalf of the owner. After giving up her position, she also helped to follow up the matter by explaining management's position to the frontline workers. Her words, 'If there's no factory, there's no worker,' suggests her ensuing alignment with the management. Hence, it appears that as worker representatives, Burmese supervisors would avoid confrontation with the Chinese managers, and upon encountering external and internal struggles, they would eventually accede to the management narrative of reorganising workers' interests according to the organisation.

One supervisor who was a worker representative, Myint Man, did not even consider it her responsibility to represent the workers. Attempting to avoid external conflicts with both the managers and the workers, Myint Man said she would like to maintain her role as a neutral conduit linking the parties, and thus she was reluctant to take a stance on management-labour issues:

> 'I want to be the bridge between the workers and the factory. When I stand with the factory, the workers don't like it, and they're like, "You're also a worker!" But if I stand with the workers, the managers

> say, "You need to stand in my shoes, you must think for me." Everyone has a problem. I don't want to be on either side.'[518]

This excerpt illustrates that amidst the conflicting expectations placed on Myint Man due to her concurrent person-based and role-based identities, she would rather engage in avoidance behaviour though a defensive veneer of neutrality than speaking out for the workers. Myint Man, along with other supervisors, might perceive an in-group identity with frontline workers and at some point, see themselves as individuals with personal qualities who aspire to become a defender of workers' interests. Still, the examples demonstrate that in case of conflicting interests between management and workers, the supervisors would remain loyal to management's interest. Their intention to comply with organisational hierarchy and fulfil role-based expectations from management would take precedence over their incentive to protect the workers' wellbeing, as their balance between organisational goals and worker satisfaction would easily be tilted in favour of those who held real power in the organisation.

Summarising this section, it is my argument that although the supervisors were promoted among the frontline workers and shared with them many similarities, they had become acculturated to some of the Chinese managers' work norms and practices. In recognition of their privileged position and role-based identity, they prioritised organisational objectives and collective interest of the factory over the entitlements of

[518] Interview 34, Burmese worker (junior supervisor).

individual frontline workers. In their capacity as worker representatives, they were prepared to disidentify from workers in the event of a management-labour dispute and align with management interests to safeguard their relationship with the Chinese managers. Although this was true, the supervisors were different from the Chinese managers in that they did not maintain great hierarchical distance between themselves and the frontline workers. To preserve an in-group sense of belonging with the frontline workers, the supervisors adapted their leadership and governance approach to meet the frontline workers' collective expectations through an expression of empathy and use of non-coercive methods to address different concerns and manage workplace behaviour.

2. Chinese-Burmese Interpreters: The Management's Mediators

In research about cross-cultural settings, scholars generally hold high expectations for people who act as intermediaries. There are the cultural brokers who take on the important 'bridge' role advocating on behalf of individuals or groups,[519] and there are the mediators whose job is to foster mutual understanding between the parties involved and encourage them to discuss their expectations.[520] When the intermediaries are of bicultural background, scholars hold them in even higher regard, since such intermediaries are assumed to have an empathetic understanding of

[519] Sophie Yohani, 'Educational Cultural Brokers and the School Adaptation of Refugee Children and Families: Challenges and Opportunities' (2013) 14 Journal of International Migration and Integration 61.
[520] Melissa Katsoris, 'Does Nationality Influence Neutrality ? The Ethical Standards and Expectations of International Mediators' (2016) 39 Fordham International Law Journal 695.

different parties and an ability to switch between different cultural frames. Some scholars suggest that bicultural individuals are inherently better at resolving disputes within organisations thanks to their supposedly superior ability in learning people's likely intentions, responding to behaviours, and choosing the appropriate strategies.[521]

Some researchers, nonetheless, have explored the limitations of bicultural people in conflict management situations. In his study of a Korean-invested factory in China, Kim observed that the factory, in order to ensure 'uninterrupted operation,' created a framework of power relations between Koreans, Korean-Chinese, and Chinese members, with Korean-Chinese situated at the middle of the hierarchical division serving as interpreters.[522] As Kim describes it, under this mode of factory regime determined by power relations, the bicultural Korean-Chinese interpreters were heavily favoured by the Korean managers, hence they constantly boasted a sense of superiority over the Chinese workers.[523] As bicultural intermediary, they might be expected to be more sympathetic to the Chinese workers' condition, but Kim discovered that although their intermediary status reinforced their sensitivity to ethnic differences, they almost spoke entirely for the Korean management's interests,

[521] Ray Friedman and Wu Liu, 'Biculturalism in Management: Leveraging the Benefits of Intrapersonal Diversity' in Robert S Wyer, Chi-yue Chi and Ying-yi Hong (eds), *Understanding Culture: Theory, Research, and Application* (Routledge 2015); Dirk Holtbrügge and Franziska Engelhard, 'Biculturals, Team Facilitation and Multicultural Team Performance: An Information-Processing Perspective' (2017) 4 European Journal of Cross-Cultural Competence and Management 236.
[522] Kim (n 1).
[523] ibid.

and being very critical of the Chinese workers, they were in constant tension with the workers, and many workers developed a feeling of animosity against them.[524]

In this section, I explore the distinct identity of the Chinese-Burmese interpreters and the roles that they had in this factory. I unveil the strategies that these interpreters used to navigate the boundaries between different parties and function as the engine of the workplace, while conforming to the expectations of the Chinese management to preserve the hierarchy and impose worker control.

2.1 Chinese-Burmese Bicultural Background

The 'Chinese-Burmese' are the people of Chinese ethnicity who are generationally settled in Myanmar and have sought to embed themselves in the mainstream Burmese society to gain greater acceptance, while continuing to preserve their distinct cultural identity.[525] According to estimates, the Chinese-Burmese constitute about 2–3% of the total population of Myanmar.[526] While there may be a general label called 'Chinese-Burmese,' Chee Kiong Tong argues that there is much heterogeneity in the Chinese-Burmese population, and that in delineating their ethnic identity, they construct intra-ethnic group boundaries based on quantification of different 'degrees of Chineseness,' which has led to different identifications with the terms '*zhongguoren*' (people of the

[524] ibid.
[525] Elaine Lynn Ee Ho and Lynette J Chua, 'Law and "Race" in the Citizenship Spaces of Myanmar: Spatial Strategies and the Political Subjectivity of the Burmese Chinese' (2016) 39 Ethnic and Racial Studies 896.
[526] Mya Than, 'The Ethnic Chinese in Myanmar and Their Identity' in Leo Suryadinata (ed), *Ethnic Chinese As Southeast Asians* (ISEAS Publishing 1997).

Chinese state) and '*huaqiao*' (ethnic Chinese people).[527] He suggests that social identity in Myanmar is variable, and people can in fact negotiate their notions of identity and their affiliation depending on different social situations.[528]

The Chinese-Burmese interpreters in Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd, starting from a young age, were socialised into the cultural components of their Chinese identity. An interpreter called Lan Lan, a young woman from a Chinese-Burmese family in Mandalay, is quite representative of the Chinese-Burmese interpreters. Lan Lan was born and raised in Myanmar, having received her education in 'Chinese schools' run by a tight-knit Chinese-Burmese community. Her education followed Myanmar's national system — from the first day of elementary school she had to recite Buddhist mantras, and during summer holidays, she was sent for retreat in Buddhist temples. What set the curriculum in her 'Chinese school' apart from other schools in Myanmar, however, was the Chinese language education, of which she had to spend extra hours learning Chinese, both written and spoken (Mandarin). Therefore, Lan Lan received a bicultural education such that she was fluent in both the Chinese and the Burmese language.

Like the other Chinese-Burmese interpreters, Lan Lan embraced the cultural content of her Chinese heritage. For example, she watched a lot of China's television drama

[527] Chee Kiong Tong, *Identity and Ethnic Relations in Southeast Asia: Racializing Chineseness* (Springer 2011). In English, the word 'Chinese' can mean both 'people of the Chinese state' and 'ethnic Chinese people,' but in Mandarin Chinese, two distinct words are used. The term '*zhongguoren,*' although literally means 'people of the Chinese state,' is occasionally used with Chinese nationalistic sentiment to address all ethnic Chinese people.
[528] ibid.

series, and during Chinese New Year, she followed Chinese tradition to return home and celebrate the festival with her family. Yet, despite her Chinese ethnic and cultural roots, Lan Lan possessed a distinct sense of identity, and she perceived herself to be different from the people of China. Categorising herself as 'Chinese-Burmese' or 'Burmese' rather than 'people of the Chinese state' ('*zhongguoren'*), Lan Lan understood her identity as bicultural, and she had a sense of belonging to the Burmese people. As she explained, 'I lived and worked in China for a brief time, selling jade, and I can get by there. But if it's about my identity, I think I'm Burmese.' Lan Lan's bicultural identity consciousness was shared by other Chinese-Burmese interpreters in the factory as well. Wang Xiao, an interpreter assigned to the maintenance section, explained his sense of identity to me: 'We have our language and culture. I'm Burmese, and also "*huaren*," but I'm not "*zhongguoren*."'[529]

Both Lan Lan and Wang Xiao are examples that the Chinese-Burmese interpreters have integrated into mainstream Burmese society. They did not limit their lives to the Chinese-Burmese community at all. Most of them, before starting their position in a Chinese-invested business such as Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd, have worked all kinds of jobs. Lan Lan taught in a kindergarten, and Wang Xiao worked in the ruby industry in the northern region of Myanmar. They had many Bamar friends, and some of them married Bamar people.[530] As native speakers of the Burmese language, the interpreters spoke Burmese among themselves in the factory, and as I observed, they

[529] *Huaren* is used to denote ethnic Chinese, and *zhongguoren* for Chinese nationals.
[530] The Bamar (also known as Burman) people are an ethnic group native to Myanmar, and also the dominant group, consisting of about 70% of Myanmar's population. The Chinese-Burmese may use the term '*laomian'* to refer to the Bamar people.

frequently mingled with the Burmese workers. Their 'Burmeseness' did not seem to be called into question, as illustrated by a frontline worker's description of Lan Lan: 'She's like the blend of China and Myanmar, but with the same attitude and behaviour like other Burmese people.'[531]

2.2 Navigating Cultural Boundaries

As bicultural people, the Chinese-Burmese interpreters possessed the advantage of having shared language and familiarity with both Burmese and Chinese cultures. Navigating through two linguistic and cultural worlds, they were the only group in the factory capable of communicating and immersing effectively in two environments with their cultural knowledge and social skills.

Although the interpreters, with their proximity to Chinese management and the authority to take disciplinary action, were probably perceived by the Burmese workers — both supervisors and frontline workers — to be situated at a higher level of the workplace hierarchy, it appears that the Burmese workers generally related to the interpreters in a personal manner. The interpreters participated in the social lives of the Burmese staff, and many Burmese staff described they had a close relationship with the interpreters. For example, Kyaw Mon Ei, a senior supervisor at the sewing section, said she and the interpreters at her section were like friends. She praised the interpreters for being easy-going and kind-natured, and that after work hours, they

[531] Interview 39, Burmese worker (frontline).

often hung out on the streets and travelled together to different places. Min Tung Kyi, a frontline worker at the cutting section, also described the interpreter assigned to the packing section, Ma Xiao, as his close friend. Recalling the fun times he had with Ma Xiao, Min Tung Kyi said, 'We would have fun, get drunk at the dorm, and he would just sleep over at my room. Sometimes we even break the rules! Like we're not allowed to smoke in the factory, but we do that anyway.'

Since the factory was organised around a rigid network of power relationships to maintain hierarchical distance, the Burmese workers heavily relied on the Chinese-Burmese interpreters to forward messages up and down the hierarchy. Nevertheless, at the factory shop floors, the interpreters also interacted with the workers in a casual and informal manner. I noticed that after translating the instructions given by Chinese managers, the interpreters would sometimes chat with the recipient of instructions while having a big smile on the face. In front of the workers, the interpreters did not behave like self-important superiors. Some interpreters, while fulfilling their role as instructors, were open to chatting with and learning stuff from the frontline workers, for example Wang Xiao said he as a mechanic who only finished junior high had learnt many English words from his staff who were university graduates.

Sometimes, a few workers would complain that the interpreters failed to deliver some important messages, or that they made mistakes in their translation, such as getting the figures wrong, and the names mixed up. Nonetheless, the interpreters were generally perceived as helpful and capable. For example, some workers saw San Mai,

the interpreter at the sewing section, as very warm and supportive, almost like a motherly figure. As Zin Shwe Wind, a frontline worker at the sewing section, said, 'She [San Mai] treats me like her daughter. When I don't understand some work procedures, I don't understand some Chinese words, I receive help from her. She's so nice to all of us. That's why I feel like a family.' Another frontline staff at the cutting section, Nhing Myo Khin, said she felt the interpreters were almost like her 'brothers and sisters' that they could be 'honest with each other.' This feeling of familiarity and trust is probably mutual, since the interpreter, Wang Xiao, likewise described that himself and the other mechanics were like 'close brothers who got each other's back.'

Given their bicultural and bilingual capacity, the Chinese-Burmese interpreters despite their having lived their entire lives in Myanmar, also had a sense of familiarity with the Chinese people. They had been learning about Chinese culture since they were small, and with China's economic rise in the recent years frequently making the headlines, it was through reading the news and watching videos on social media that they became much informed about contemporary China. Furthermore, they benefited directly from China's economic rise. As Wang Xiao recalled, Chinese investment used to be very rare in Myanmar, and most Chinese-Burmese people were poverty-stricken and had to work all kinds of jobs. Things only started to get better for them after China expanded investment in Myanmar. 'Because we can speak Mandarin,' said Wang Xiao, 'with all the Chinese investment pouring into Myanmar, we as "*huaren*" are in a better position compared with ordinary Burmese, it is easier for us to find jobs and we get higher salaries.' Throughout the years, the interpreters began to admire China for

being a strong and rich country, and they formed the impression that the Chinese people from China are hard-working, rich, and belong to a 'high class.'

In the factory, however, the Chinese-Burmese interpreters' sense of familiarity with China did not seem to translate into strong identification with the Chinese managers. As I have discussed in the previous subsection, the interpreters did not look upon China as their 'motherland' and the people from China as their compatriots. While the interpreters could converse fluently in Mandarin with the Chinese managers, in the process of interacting and working with them, the interpreters' bicultural identity consciousness was constantly activated, questioned, and reinforced. They acknowledged their ethnic Chinese identity, yet they also took pride in Burmese culture and had a sense of belonging to the Burmese. For example, Lan Lan wanted the Chinese managers to show respect to the habit, custom, and culture of the Burmese people, and she admitted she did not like the Chinese managers at first, due to their occasional expression of condescending attitude towards Myanmar:

> 'Something I find really offensive, is when they [the Chinese managers] said, "Is there anything good about Myanmar at all?" Things like that. They also littered. I said to them, "Teacher, you shouldn't litter." But they ignored me and said, "Myanmar is dirty anyway! You go and criticise someone else!"'[532]

[532] Interview 56, Chinese-Burmese interpreter.

When Lan Lan openly expressed her disagreement with the Chinese managers, the Chinese managers quickly shot back at her and invoked the ethnic card to accuse her of not standing by their side. Lan Lan recalled the Chinese manager said to her, 'Lan Lan, you're also Chinese ("*huaren*"), you belong to China, why are you speaking for Myanmar? Why aren't you speaking for the Chinese?' While Lan Lan, like other Chinese-Burmese interpreters, admired China's achievements and appreciated certain traits of the Chinese managers such as diligence and willingness to endure hardship, she wanted to preserve feelings of distinctiveness in her bicultural identity. She was unmoved by the Chinese managers' attempt to influence her by fuelling Chinese nationalistic sentiment and invoking a transnational Chinese identity. As discussed by Paulston in her work, the ability to choose cultural elements with which one identifies and to become more impervious to sanctions one does not like is a shared experience of bicultural people.[533] Asserting a distinct Chinese-Burmese bicultural identity, interpreters like Lan Lan had a strong identification with the Burmese, and she did not share with the Chinese managers a strong sense of Chinese identity consciousness. Even as a polite and respectful woman, she was unafraid to confront the Chinese managers when she noticed their disrespectful and patronising behaviour towards the Burmese people.

Although the Chinese-Burmese interpreters did not identify particularly with or feel close to the Chinese managers, the Chinese managers also maintained a hierarchical distance between themselves and the interpreters, viewing the interpreters largely as

[533] Christina Bratt Paulston, *Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Bilingual Education* (Multilingual Matters 1992).

subordinates with whom they had a purely professional relationship. In the shop floors, the Chinese managers relied heavily on interpreters. Interpreters were required for all detailed discussions, particularly during meetings. Despite this, they frequently criticised the interpreters' performance. Mr. Mei from the sewing section, for instance, told me that occasionally, the interpreters made mistakes when translating certain technical terms, and the workers, who became really confused, would just stare at him while expecting clarification. The maintenance section manager, Mr. Jun, complained to me that the interpreters could only deliver sixty percent of his message, and that when they delivered the wrong instruction, it would be evident in the way the workers performed their duties, and he must immediately step in to provide the correct instruction. A number of non-technical terms were also lost in translation. Mr. Mei recalled that during a sectional meeting, he described the supervisors as 'cows,' meaning that they were too stubborn to 'turn their heads around.' After seeing the supervisors look dejected following the meeting, Mr. Mei realised the interpreter had 'misinterpreted' his words to mean he had referred to the workers 'as stupid cows,' and angrily, he laid the blame solely on the interpreter.

2.3 Functioning as the Smoothing Dynamic

At first glance, the Chinese-Burmese interpreters' assigned role in this factory appears to be passive and straightforward. Their primary and most important duty was to translate messages during meetings, discussions, and other interactions in the workplace. In this sense, they fitted the typical 'conduit' role expected of any interpreters, which is to act upon instruction to transmit messages between parties

reliably and without distortion.[534] Yet, after close observation of the workplace, I realised that with their cross-cultural competence derived from the advantage of language and familiarity, the role of the interpreters extended far beyond mere provision of interpretation. In many ways, they were acting as cultural brokers and fulfilling this role in a modest fashion. The utility that they offered in this multicultural work environment was significant, in that they effectively functioned as the lubricant to ensure smooth factory operation and communication across cultural boundaries.

The interpreters worked alongside other frontline workers whenever they had free time. San Mai, assigned to the sewing section, assisted thread-trimming. Wang Xiao, assigned the role of mechanic, assisted in infrastructure maintenance such as electricity supply and water purification system. Ma Xiao, interpreter at the packing section, assisted in packing products and moving carton boxes onto the delivery truck. None of the interpreters received training upon starting their position. But due to their longer experience and unique status, they gradually taught themselves, performed work tasks, and proactively took up some supervisory responsibilities. For example, interpreters at the sewing section, including San Mai, taught new workers how to operate the sewing machine by demonstrating. When the workers failed to understand the instructions of Chinese managers but were too afraid to ask for clarification, they would sometimes turn to the interpreters for guidance.

[534] See discussion of the 'conduit' model of interpreter role and its limitations in Deborah Dysart-Gale, 'Communication Models, Professionalization, and the Work of Medical Interpreters' (2005) 17 Health Communication 91.

The typical duties at their assigned sections were only part of the interpreter's job. They were of course relied by the Chinese managers as intermediaries to communicate with frontline workers and inform them of management decisions. However, quite often they were not merely passive recipients of instructions. They became agents actively involved in solving problems and sharing some of the decision-making responsibilities. As San Mai, an interpreter, described her work relationship with the Chinese managers:

> 'They want me to work with them. When big problems occur, they want me to be there to provide interpretation, to solve the problem together. If I'm not there, there'll be quite a bit of trouble.'[535]

From San Mai's words, it is evident that the Chinese-Burmese interpreters were somewhat seen by the Chinese managers as personal assistants, probably due to their bicultural advantage and their ability to facilitate communication with local community. For example, during my stay, the factory owner and managers headed for a negotiation with the representatives of a nearby village to finalise a land purchase agreement. They brought along Wang Xiao and another interpreter, Hu Xiao, from the administrative section. Throughout the negotiation process, the interpreters participated in discussion of issues like preparation of documents, registration of title deeds, filing of tax returns, and they represented the factory to communicate the factory's views to the village representatives. When the factory owners and managers

[535] Interview 4, Chinese-Burmese interpreter.

were discussing among themselves, the interpreters acted on their own and had a chat with the village representatives, then later relayed the messages back to the factory side. If not for the active facilitation of the interpreters to promote more open and receptive communication, the negotiation process would probably have taken much longer, and it would have been harder for the two sides to reach an agreement.

There are more examples demonstrating the facilitative role of Chinese-Burmese interpreters. When a serious incident of drunk fighting happened in the factory, the Chinese managers launched an investigation, and the interpreter, San Mai, assumed the role of the investigator. During the whole incident, the contribution of San Mai was significant. She was all over the factory collecting evidence and talking to witnesses from different sections. After the investigation, she reported her findings to the Chinese managers, describing when did the incident take place, how did it end, and with her own analysis, she suggested that the incident probably occurred because the workers were tired out by overtime work and wanted to have some fun, eventually ending up intoxicated and losing control of themselves. Therefore, unlike the supervisors, the interpreters, even if staffed to a particular section, were often freely floating between different sections in accordance to need. For example, in respect of the incident about unmet production target that I have discussed in the previous section, when the supervisor kept pushing her staff to work harder, it was the interpreter, Lan Lan, who stepped in to handle the situation. Like the other interpreters, Lan Lan had limited knowledge of the garment production process, but

she was able to help by visiting different sections to learn about the nature of the problem and reporting such to the Chinese managers.

Aside from spanning intraorganisational boundaries, the Chinese-Burmese interpreters were in a convenient position to navigate cultural boundaries. For the interpreters, working alongside the Chinese managers often involved experiencing identity. With Chinese managers at times attempting to impose Chinese identification on them, the interpreters did not, like how Hsin-chun Tasaw Lu discussed in her study of Chinese-Burmese immigrants in Taiwan, 're-ethnicise' themselves as Chinese and effectuate emotional ties to their 'compatriots.'[536] Instead, they maintained their unique bicultural identification, and at times evoked varying degrees of 'Burmeseness' to assist the Chinese managers gain a better understanding of the Burmese cultural context. For instance, they reminded Chinese managers not to give instructions by pointing with their feet, as this would be considered insulting to Burmese people.

Another example can illustrate the cultural intermediary role of the Chinese-Burmese interpreters. Before Buddhist festivals, it was typical that many Burmese workers would request for day-off, so they could travel to some far away temples to worship and give offerings. To the irreligious Chinese managers, this was a reason difficult to accept. There was a time when they reprimanded the workers for making such requests, because in their eyes, Buddha worship is merely a minor activity that can easily be done at home. Knowing that the Buddhist faith constitutes a core component

[536] Hsin-chun Tasaw Lu, 'Festivalizing Thingyan, Negotiating Ethnicity: Burmese Chinese Migrants in Taiwan' (2008) 12 Journal of Burma Studies 29.

of the Burmese way of life, and that visiting famous pagodas is an important social activity of the Burmese people, the interpreters came to the scene and tried to persuade the Chinese managers to accede to the workers' request. They explained how the Burmese people are by nature very religious, and how buddha worship is simply their way of life. By suggesting Chinese managers to view the workers' request in the Burmese cultural context, the interpreters were attempting to bridge the gap in cultural expectations and alleviate tension between the Chinese managers and the Burmese workers.

Acting as the intermediary to make organisational dynamics work, the Chinese-Burmese interpreters also took on an important mediating role by identifying and addressing potential conflicts. Notable examples can be found in the involvement of interpreters in the factory's communication with external parties. When the factory management entered into negotiations with Myanmar's labour ministry to discuss overtime rules and laws, Wang Xiao took upon himself the initiative to act as the 'mediator,' after successfully cultivating a sense of familiarity with the participating government officials. Keenly aware of the different views between the two sides, Wang Xiao assumed a major role to mediate and prevent tensions. As he said, 'Since I had known them [government officials] and the matter at hand, I can speak to this party and speak to that party, trying to mediate a bit.' Even though his official title was 'interpreter,' Wang Xiao took active part in the communication and co-constructed the communicative content and process with the parties involved, suggesting he was much more than a 'neutral conduit.' With an appreciation of

different parties' concerns, Wang Xiao was able to ease some tensions and set a constructive tone to the consensus-building process. Engaging in rapport-oriented relational work was one of his key tasks as an interpreter,[537] and the underpinning influence on his ability to mediate the interactions was his understanding of the people involved and his relationship with them.

Influenced by their mediating role to prevent tensions from escalating into confrontations, the Chinese-Burmese interpreters used various interpretation strategies to shape the dynamics of communication. Such strategies, as I observed, might sacrifice accuracy to translation to avoid triggering negative emotional responses from the receiving party. One of the most obvious examples was the deliberate omittance of certain aspects of the speaker's narrative that would be considered unpleasant, particularly insulting expressions, harsh criticisms, or rude comments. This interpretation strategy was used by Wang Xiao during the negotiations between Chinese managers and Burmese government officials:

> 'I know some government officers may get into conflict with the Chinese managers here at the factory, we at the middle as interpreters, if the Chinese managers say something rude and unpleasant, I'll not translate them.'[538]

[537] For discussion on the relationship between familiarity, relational work, and process of interpreting, see Rachel Mapson and George Major, 'Interpreters, Rapport, and the Role of Familiarity' (2021) 176 Journal of Pragmatics 63.
[538] Interview 19, Chinese-Burmese interpreter.

Accuracy of interpretation is widely considered to be a top priority for interpreters. Professional interpreters are typically required to adhere to a code of ethics established by the regional, national, or international organisations to which they belong, and one straightforward ethical principle almost all organisations agree is that interpreter should interpret faithfully and accurately, omitting nothing said nor adding anything which was not said.[539] Though, in the case of negotiations, parties usually need to sort out conflicting views before reaching an agreement, and as noted by Leong Ko when studying real-life practice of interpreters, verbal confrontations are common during the negotiation process, and such confrontations may be intensified by some strong language uttered occasionally or unintentionally.[540] Wang Xiao, knowing that the rendering of strong language may lead to a breakdown in communications, exercised discretion to omit those words and interpret in a more 'diplomatic' way. With his own judgment, he managed to mediate the cross-cultural interactions and 'soften' the tense atmosphere by ensuring that the messages he delivered would be free of emotion-provoking words.

This exercise of control to modify the originals in emotionally charged conversations, as a means of managing and reducing potential grievances, was a technique frequently used by other interpreters at the factory. But, there is more to this method than merely omitting the rude words. When the Chinese managers got angry and

[539] See Helen Spencer-Oatey and Jianyu Xing, 'The Impact of Culture on Interpreter Behaviour (Unpublished Version)' in Helga Kotthoff and Helen Spencer-Oatey (eds), *Handbook of Intercultural Communication* (Mouton de Gruyter 2009).
[540] Leong Ko, 'Training Ethical Translators and Interpreters' in Leong Ko and Ping Chen (eds), *Translation and Cross-Cultural Communication Studies in the Asia Pacific* (Brill Rodopi 2015).

yelled at the workers, the interpreters might use a different tone and employ different words to convey the message. San Mai explained how she used this interpretation strategy:

> 'Sometimes when the Chinese managers get angry and reprimand them [the Burmese workers], I don't express the same attitude towards the workers while talking to them. I try my best not to express anger. Like when the production targets are not met, it's impossible for me to reprimand the workers like the Chinese managers.'[541]

As this excerpt reveals, San Mai adjusted not only the content of the message, but also the method of relaying it. Researchers suggest that interpreters tend to be easily affected by the speaker's emotions, and this is typically reflected in the interpreters' emulating of the speaker's physiological arousal.[542] Yet for San Mai, even if the Chinese managers were agitated, she would keep a cool head and express a cheerful attitude. As she said, 'Whatever happens, I have to speak to them [the workers] with a smile on my face.' While I observed how San Mai provided interpretation, I noticed that whenever the Chinese managers looked angry and used a reprimanding tone to speak to the workers, San Mai would make significant modification to the words. For example, when the Chinese managers angrily ordered

[541] Interview 4, Chinese-Burmese interpreter.
[542] Paweł Korpal and Aleksandra Jasielska, 'Investigating Interpreters' Empathy: Are Emotions in Simultaneous Interpreting Contagious?' (2019) 31 Target 2; Mira Kadrić, Sylvi Rennert and Christina Schäffner, 'Managing Expressiveness and Interaction', *Diplomatic and Political Interpreting Explained* (Routledge 2021).

the workers to reflect upon their 'silly mistakes,' San Mai would convey the essential meaning of what was being said, yet she would use a more polite tone and speak in a tactful manner. She might even crack a few jokes with the workers, hoping to soften the impact of the Chinese managers' harsh attitude. When electing to use this interpretation strategy, it appears that San Mai was somewhat influenced by the Burmese social norm of *'anade*,' as she showed certain empathy and sensitivity to the workers' feelings:

> 'After all, the Burmese and Chinese, they're all human beings. You say the same thing, but you can say it in a pleasant or not so pleasant way … Speaking in a pleasant way will give a different feeling to the recipient.'[543]

Despite the language barrier, many members of the factory were aware that the interpreters were using mediating techniques. When selecting alternative words and rephrasing sentences to convey the intended meanings, the interpreters often needed more time to formulate their thoughts and choose the 'right' words, therefore the messages they relayed were usually much longer than the original message. Knowing what the interpreters were doing, some Burmese workers were pleased and described the interpreters as 'kind' and 'understanding,' since they thought the interpreters were being thoughtful by hiding the Chinese managers' 'rude words.' Some factory members, however, were concerned whether the intended meaning of their message

[543] Interview 4, Chinese-Burmese interpreter.

could be effectively relayed to the other party. For example, some Chinese managers might ask San Mai what exactly she was saying to the workers, and reluctant to explain, San Mai would simply answer things along the lines of 'It's nothing special.' Although scholarship suggests that abusive supervision in emotionally charged situations, like that experienced by the Burmese workers, can badly affect their wellbeing and turn them into future quitters,[544] the Chinese managers largely considered such supervision as a disciplinary mechanism to send a strong message that errors would not be tolerated, and workers must always perform to the best of their ability. Some Chinese managers, as a result, felt that it was not appropriate for the interpreters to soften the force of criticisms and change the interpretation attached to their original words.

2.4 Securing Workplace Control for the Management

Sandwiched between competing cultures and interests, the Chinese-Burmese interpreters were acting as the 'bridge' to coordinate and mediate communication between Chinese managers and Burmese workers. Some workers described the interpreters as a reliable intermediary. For example, a mechanic named Aung Myae Chan described Wang Xiao, the interpreter at his section, as a neutral medium of communication. Nhing Myo Khin, a frontline worker at the sewing section, also said she trusted the interpreters at her section and admired them for their ability to speak the Chinese language. However, just like the supervisors, the interpreters were factory

[544] Darryl B Rice, Regina Taylor and Juanita K Forrester, 'The Unwelcoming Experience of Abusive Supervision and the Impact of Leader Characteristics: Turning Employees into Poor Organizational Citizens and Future Quitters' (2020) 29 European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology 601.

employees embedded in a system of strict hierarchy. Without having such duty explicated stated, the preservation of workplace order on behalf of the factory was an important part of their *raison d'être*, such that inevitably, they had to become somewhat acculturated to the norms and understandings of the Chinese managers. Even with some effort to balance competing needs, the interpreters were sometimes perceived as having too much power, as they tended to become a mechanism of workplace control by identifying, dissolving, and restraining workers' expression of grievances.

There were workers who expressed serious doubt about the interpreters' neutrality. Kyaw Mon Ei, a senior supervisor of the sewing section, was one of those workers that harboured this thought. 'When there are problems, I think the interpreters would side with the "*siya*,"' she suggested, indicating her disbelief of the neutrality of the interpreters. When I asked her why, she explained that because she was just an 'ordinary worker' not related in any manner to the Chinese owner of the factory. As a matter of fact, Kyaw Mon Ei was far from an 'ordinary worker.' She was a senior supervisor having established years of close working relationship with the Chinese managers. The words of Kyaw Mon Ei, nonetheless, suggest that even as a senior supervisor with privileges and relative positional power, she was acutely aware she was merely a worker subject to unequal power relations, and she was unconvinced that the interpreters could remain neutral in conflictual situations between her and the Chinese management.

Win Yin Nu, junior supervisor at the packing section, similarly thought that the Chinese-Burmese interpreters would side with the Chinese managers instead of remaining neutral, but he attributed this to the interpreters' ethnic identity. 'I think they [the Chinese-Burmese interpreters and Chinese managers] are the same people,' said Win Yin Nu. 'The interpreters can speak Chinese, that's why they side with the Chinese.' Win Yin Nu's strong ethnic consciousness and his lumping of Chinese-Burmese interpreters and Chinese managers together exemplify how the Chinese-Burmese may be perceived as perpetual 'foreigners' in mainstream Burmese society. Living in a country where the government strives to maintain dominance of the Burman race over minority groups, the Chinese-Burmese have to embed themselves in society and downplay their 'Chinese' identity as a means to gain greater acceptance.[545] The Chinese-Burmese have never been recognised by the Burmese government as one of the 'national races' of Myanmar, and in the language of common Burmese, 'Chinese' is used as a race rather than an ethnic group, reinforcing the image of the 'un-indigenousness' nature of the Chinese-Burmese people.[546] In a similar fashion, the Chinese-Burmese interpreters in the factory refrained from asserting their Chinese ethnic identity. They instead expressed a sense of belonging to Myanmar, and there was no indication they deliberately signalled markers of Chinese ethnic identity to legitimise their higher hierarchical status. Though, their impartiality as intermediary was still called into question by virtue of their bicultural background,

[545] Ho and Chua (n 525).
[546] Min Zin, 'Burmese Attitude toward Chinese: Portrayal of the Chinese in Contemporary Cultural and Media Works' (2012) 31 Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs 115.

and there appears to be a belief among some workers that interpreters were predisposed to be biased.

As I took note of how the Chinese-Burmese interpreters set out to resolve conflicts and manage tensions in the work environment, my findings reveal that consistent with the view of some Burmese workers, the interpreters did appear to be inclined, in many circumstances, to side with the Chinese management. For example, Phyo Mon Su of the packing section said occasionally after she was reprimanded by a Chinese manager, she would complain to the interpreter, but the interpreter would simply say things to her like, 'This is just the way it is. If you work in another factory, you'll be reprimanded too, no matter you're right or wrong. Maybe the "*siya*" doesn't know you're working hard.' Upon expressing her frustration to the unnamed interpreter, Phyo Mon Su was told to 'suck it up,' to accept things as they were and not to expect too much, because according to the interpreter, it is a 'usual thing' for workers to endure some hardship. Appearing to criticise Phyo Mon Su from the perspective of the management, it is intriguing to note how the typically approachable interpreters articulated limited empathy towards the workers, and instead expressed a work-oriented attitude expecting workers to submit to management authority.

The above example of interpreters' handling of worker grievance illustrates that, while it appears the strategies of interpretation were for protecting workers' wellbeing, they were more likely intended to be anchored to management interest to prevent conflicts and secure workplace control. The following excerpt of Htet Lin Wai, a junior

supervisor, details the incident of her wanting the interpreter to submit her grievance to management, but she found that the interpreter had effectively censored her message:

> 'I was working hard, and the packing department was really busy, but Mr. Zhou thought I was slacking off. I became stressed and developed negative feelings. I wanted the interpreter to translate something to Mr. Zhou (the Chinese manager). I said things like "I'm not okay with this job" to Mr. Zhou, and the interpreter translated some words, but Mr. Zhou made no response at all. I don't think the interpreter actually translated my words.'[547]

Htet Lin Wai thought that there was some misunderstanding between her and Mr. Zhou, and she wanted the interpreter to express her views and feelings honestly to Mr. Zhou. However, it appears that notwithstanding her wish, the interpreter manipulated her communication with the Chinese managers. As reported by Phyo Phi Phein, a senior supervisor at the sewing section, the interpreters would even stop the Burmese workers from expressing their opinion:

> 'Before they start to translate, they listen to us, then they say things like, "Don't talk like that, the Chinese will probably get angry. Your idea will not go well, I want you to stop."'[548]

[547] Interview 22, Burmese worker (junior supervisor).
[548] Interview 32, Burmese worker (senior supervisor).

The way the interpreters handled the translation gave an impression to Phyo Phi Phein that they were only concerned with whether the Chinese managers would be agitated, at the expense of the Burmese workers' right to express their feelings openly and honestly. As both the examples of Htet Lin Wai and Phyo Phi Phein show, in deciding what was relevant in an exchange and what to transmit from one party to another, the interpreters had essentially assumed a 'gatekeeper role' that processed information selectively in a patterned fashion, in order to censor information which they thought was unnecessary or that the other party would not like to hear. [549] Some scholars criticised such behaviour as 'information-manipulation,' and argued that manipulating information violates the code of ethics of interpreting and damages interpersonal relationships. [550] Arguably, when the interpreters actively changed a speaker's utterances and hid the expression of grievance feelings, with or without informing the speaker, both the Chinese managers and Burmese workers were deprived of the opportunity to hear what each actually had to say, but instead hearing only what the interpreter decided to tell them. [551] The interpreters were effectively excluding factory members from open communication about their feelings and differences, yet, it was through such open communication that members of the factory could possibly engage in a process of conflict management and gradually improve their cross-cultural communicative competence.

[549] See Davidson (n 148).
[550] Chaowei Zhu and Junlan Li, 'Information Manipulation in Three Non-Conduit Roles in Medical Interpreting: A Process-Based Analysis' in Carsten Sinner, Christine Paasch-Kaiser and Johannes Härtel (eds), *Translation in the Digital Age: Translation 40* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2020).
[551] See the discussion about 'mediated' interpreting approach in Sandra Beatriz Hale, *Community Interpreting* (Palgrave Macmillan 2007).

The tactics of communication manipulation could also take a more proactive form. Phyo Mon Su, a worker at the packing department, was employed in another factory co-owned by the owner of Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd and another businessman named Mr. Lee. This Mr. Lee ran into financial difficulties, and one day, he suddenly disappeared. When the news of Mr. Lee's disappearance reached the factory, some of the workers, including Phyo Mon Su, held a meeting among themselves, with a Chinese-Burmese interpreter, whom Phyo Mon Su refused to name, also present at the scene. The attendees were discussing the factory's situation, sharing their worries and grief with each other, and they agreed to keep the meeting a secret. But to the surprise of Phyo Mon Su, shortly after the meeting, the Chinese managers came to them, saying they were informed by the interpreter about the workers' worries and assured the attendees that the factory 'would be fine.' As things later turned out, the factory shortly collapsed, and luckily a new factory was established, which became Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd. Reflecting on this incident, what angered Phyo Mon Su most was that the unnamed interpreter leaked the word of the secret meeting to the Chinese managers, and Phyo Mon Su said she would never trust the interpreters again.

That unnamed interpreter was probably allowed to attend the 'secret meeting,' because the workers acknowledged the interpreter's close relationship with them and accepted the interpreter as one of their own. Hence, it was natural that the workers, including Phyo Mon Su, felt that the unnamed interpreter had betrayed their trust by supplying 'secret' information to the managers. It appears that the interpreter took

advantage of the boundary-spanning position to monitor the workers, and having interpreted information as damaging to workplace stability, the interpreter originated communication of such to the managers, suggesting his or her alignment with management interest in preventing workers from transforming perceived wrongdoing into a grievance and turning grievance into action.

In some instances, it appears that the interpreters were on the side of the Chinese managers by serving as their mouthpiece, or even acting on behalf of the factory to dissolve management-labour tensions. When the workers were worried that the factory might shut down anytime because of Mr. Lee's disappearance, rendering them jobless and with wages unpaid, some began to go on strike demanding immediate payment of wages. As the crisis unfolded, the interpreter, Hu Xiao, was instructed by the Chinese managers to handle the situation, and his role was active, critical, and anything but neutral. Giving an impression as if he was speaking on behalf of the management, Hu Xiao announced to the aggrieved workers that he was sent by the factory to speak to them, and he tried to pacify the workers, persuade them to return to work, and assured that they should not be worried about unpaid wages. The strategy used by Hu Xiao was consistent with his role of preserving workplace order, and clearly aligned with the factory's interest of preventing workers from taking collective action.

Yet, even if the interpreters had followed Chinese managers' narratives and represented them in negotiations, their role was primarily mediating, rather than

managerial and disciplinary, as they were somewhat perceived by Burmese workers to be lacking in authority to give orders. When I asked Hu Xiao what it meant to be an interpreter at this workplace, he admitted that his authority was limited. 'How do I say it … When the "*siya*" speaks, and we are at the back, the workers will listen. But if I speak to them directly, they're not that willing to listen to me.' As my conversation with him continued, I asked Hu Xiao when the Burmese workers would follow his instructions, and his response indicated the extent of his authority in the eyes of the workers:

> 'I don't usually give orders to them. For once or twice, maybe it's okay. Like if they want to smoke in the factory, I can tell them to stop. I will say to them, "The ones above [Chinese managers] criticise me, but I don't want to criticise you. You know that, I know that." Then they may gradually improve their behaviour.'[552]

San Mai would similarly take a non-coercive approach when it comes to changing a workers' behaviour. She recounted there was a time when a frontline worker had a huge argument with her supervisor, as she was angry with the punishment she received for allegedly failing to comply with instructions. Thereafter, whenever the supervisor talked to her or walked pass her, she would make a disgusted face. San Mai tried to persuade her to stop by saying, 'Promise me, your facial expression, your gestures, the way you speak, don't try to hurt other people's self-esteem … Can you

[552] Interview 3, Chinese-Burmese interpreter.

promise me?' Nonetheless, San Mai noticed the worker was still acting in the same manner, and San Mai admitted to me that she 'had no other way to deal with her.' Therefore, unlike the Burmese supervisors, the Chinese-Burmese interpreters were generally not associated with a disciplinary role derived from apparent positional authority. Whereas the supervisors, accultured to the managerial norms of the Chinese managers, readily resorted to the use of coercive disciplinary measures, the interpreters were very much inclined to use manipulative but non-coercive strategies.

To sum up this section, I argue that the Chinese-Burmese interpreters, with their unique advantage of language and familiarity, navigated across Chinese and Burmese cultural worlds using their knowledge, while retaining a unique sense of bicultural identity that expressed a sense of belonging to Myanmar. In this factory, their advantage allowed them to freely float between different sections to facilitate communication and coordinate activities. They were the *de facto* engines of the cross-cultural environment, both during and outside of the production process. Functioning to ensure smooth dynamic of the work environment, they also adjusted to management expectations of harmony and order, and they opted to use various non-coercive and mediating strategies to dissolve grievance feelings and restrain the expression and communication of grievances across boundaries.

A 'mediator,' in the traditional sense, is someone who offers a solution to the conflicting parties, and neutrality, impartiality, and objectivity are said to be

fundamental to the mediation process.[553] Since there is agreement in scholarship that mediation does not work well under conditions of unequal power, some scholars advocate for 'neutrality' to be understood as the equality of treatment by mediator throughout the process, and that responsible mediators should intervene to address the power discrepancy and avoid unequal outcomes.[554] It is suggested by Touval and Zartmann that mediators are better perceived as having an interest in achieving an outcome acceptable to both parties but not so partial to one side.[555] With notable power imbalance and organisational hierarchy in Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd,[556] there are probably expectations from observers that the Chinese-Burmese interpreters, with their cross-cultural competence and mediating role, are in an appropriate position to interact empathetically with different groups, mediate flexibly between cultures, and address effectively the imbalances stemming from power and cultural differences.

Despite the optimistic expectations, as I have discussed in this section, when the Chinese-Burmese interpreters were handling complaints and grievances, rarely did

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[553] David Flynn, 'The Social Worker as Family Mediator: Balancing Power in Cases Involving Family Violence' (2005) 58 Australian Social Work 407; Joseph B Stulberg, *Taking Charge/Managing Conflict* (Lexington Books 1987).

[554] Carol A Ippolito and Dean G Pruitt, 'Power Balancing in Mediation: Outcomes and Implications of Mediator Intervention' (1990) 1 International Journal of Conflict Management 341; Flynn (n 553); Douglas H Yarn, *Dictionary of Conflict Resolution* (Jossey-Bass 1999).

[555] Saadia Touval and I William Zartman, 'Mediation in International Conflicts', *Mediation Research: The Process and Effectiveness of Third-Party Intervention* (Jossey-Bass 1989).

[556] Several conditions can lead to power imbalances, and the conditions involve disparities in areas such as self-esteem, resources, gender, race, class, expertise, legitimacy, identification, ability to coerce and reward, and quantity and nature of information. Apart from the factory's organisational hierarchy established by the chain-of-command accountability mechanism, the power imbalance was ubiquitous, considering the contrast between Burmese workers of which were mostly young local Burmese women from nearby villages, and the Chinese managers of which the majority were older Chinese men from major industrial cities in China. See Sara Cobb, 'Empowerment and Mediation: A Narrative Perspective' (1993) 9 Negotiation Journal 245; John R French and Bertram Raven, 'The Bases of Social Power' in Dorwin Cartwright and Alvin Zander (eds), *Group Dynamics: Research and Theory* (Harper-Collins 1968).

they work on fostering a mutual agreement based on compromise and consensus.[557] Although they had a stronger sense of cultural identity and closeness towards the Burmese community, by selectively interpreting factory members' words, halting their expression of feelings, and criticising their viewpoints, the interpreters discouraged the factory members, especially the Burmese workers, from participating in open and honest communication. Rather than helping the factory members harness and coordinate their power to manage the power imbalance stemming from hierarchical differences, the interpreters were using strategies to reiterate and reinforce, instead of equalise, the existing power imbalance within the organisational hierarchy. Therefore, it can be seen how the interpreters' workplace behaviour was highly context-dependent, inseparable from both the cultural contexts like biculturality, locality, cross-cultural competence, and the dynamics of hierarchy and asymmetric power relations inherent in this Chinese-invested garment factory, of which the chief purpose was to preserve order-based harmony to maximise capitalist production and profits.

3. Conclusion

This chapter discusses the ways that the workplace behaviour of the 'people in between,'— local Burmese supervisors and bicultural Chinese-Burmese interpreters— was informed by their sense of identity, culturally-influenced values, and job duties

[557] Katalien Bollen and Martin Euwema, 'Workplace Mediation: An Underdeveloped Research Area' (2013) Volume 29 Negotiation and Conflict Management Research 329.

stemming from their hierarchical position. It illustrates the situational dimensions that exert influence on their role as the cultural intermediaries.

Delegated power to control the day-to-day work environment, the Burmese supervisors, as the privileged 'local elites,' adjusted to the Chinese managers' expectations of emphasising output and productivity. Attempting to maintain amicable relationship with frontline staff, the supervisors strategically used persuasion techniques combined with display of empathy to direct them to forsake their demands and align their attitude with organisational needs. Different from the Burmese supervisors, the Chinese-Burmese interpreters were much less involved in supervisory duties, and their primary role was facilitative and mediating. Having developed cross-cultural competence from their bicultural and bilingual upbringing, the Chinese-Burmese interpreters spanned cultural boundaries while maintaining a unique sense of identity. As the cultural broker, they assisted factory members with culturally shaped knowledge, and their biculturality also enabled them to facilitate cross-cultural communication and lead to improved coordination and productivity across sections. But importantly, through their strategies of interpretation, they effectively became a mechanism in the factory to drive workers to accommodate organisational needs and prevent emergence of disputes.

While some scholars may be high hopes for cultural intermediaries in a multicultural work setting, given that informal channels emphasising communication, collaboration, and consensus are considered to be more capable of addressing workplace grievances

amicably,[558] such cultural intermediaries — as an integral part of the organisational structure subject to the ubiquitous power relations amplified by established mechanisms — may not be inclined to guide the parties towards a climate of balanced power. Rather than working as the 'bridge' to craft a mutually beneficial and creative solution, they may instead be loyal to the management's interest and work towards dismissing the needs of workers and discouraging them from exercising voice.

Throughout my thesis, I have shown that it is important to contextualise management-labour relations to recognise the influence of culture as nuanced and layered variables manifested in the interchange of norms, perceptions, and habits. The relational nature of workplace dynamic involving the cultural intermediaries, as discussed in this chapter, further demonstrates that analysing 'national culture' or 'cultural orientation' as predictors of workplace behaviour may be problematic. While culturally shaped differences in behaviour certainly exist, the expression of cultural identity by the Burmese supervisors and Chinese-Burmese interpreters in this multicultural work environment is very much a contextual construct, with different elements being stressed in different situations and relationships. As this chapter shows, it is also vital to consider the influence of power dynamics and social controls of capitalist production management on the frontline work practices of cultural intermediaries. The examples of tensions between the cultural intermediaries and other factory members not only reflect the inherent power discrepancies, but also contribute to our

[558] Gwartney-gibbs and Lach (n 43); Fodhla McGrane, John Wilson and Tommy Cammock, 'Leading Employees in One-to-One Dispute Resolution' (2005) 26 Leadership and Organization Development Journal 263.

understanding of how contextual power-laden elements form an integral part of our everyday cross-cultural interaction.

CHAPTER NINE – CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I explored the dynamics of management-labour relations between Chinese expatriate managers and Burmese workers in the 'East meets East' work environment of Myanmar New Era Co. Ltd, a Chinese-invested garment factory in Myanmar. The influx of Chinese enterprises in Myanmar has led to the introduction of Chinese norms and practices. Nevertheless, when the Chinese managers regenerated their system of governance in Myanmar, they found themselves confronted with unfamiliar patterns of knowing, perceiving, and behaving, because the Burmese workers largely retained their work expectations derived from their fundamental visions and beliefs, despite being constantly exposed to and governed under a different formative context. By examining Chinese and Burmese factory members' culturally shaped ideas and practices, identifying the underlying causes of their mismatch in expectations, and exploring the role of intermediaries in bridging their divide, this study sheds light on the nature of tensions in cross-cultural management-labour relations and provides a deeper understanding of the work environment of Chinese enterprises overseas.

Throughout the theoretical chapter, I acknowledge that management and industrial relations scholarship has unveiled much about the structure, system, and work process in organisations, and through the analysis of conflicting interests between capital and labour, has furthered our understanding of power and class in workplaces. However, I argue that the reality is more complicated, and that analyses in scholarship,

particularly research works investigating foreign-owned companies, have not adequately taken into account the cultural dimensions of work relations. Nowadays, as more companies expand their operations into other parts of the world, more people than ever find themselves working in multicultural environments, of which there are different norms, habits, and rules for behaviour depending on the socio-cultural contexts. I put the cross-cultural workplace into ethnographic lens to unveil culture as an often neglected yet important layer of analysis. Although culture is widely used in scholarship as a concept to scrutinise and compare work behaviours, it is often operationalised as a homogeneous, static, and independent variable. Many nuances are lost in Western-centric analytical frameworks that attempt to quantify and measure culturally influenced behaviour in a rigid and simplistic manner.

In this research, therefore, I use legal culture as a lens to capture nuances of the cross-cultural factory work environment and to understand how context linked differences in expectations, visions, and understandings would result in emergence of tensions. Although such intergroup differences as a phenomenon can, arguably, be attributed to other factors, I argue that social phenomenon by nature is linked to demographic features and intertwined with a range of distinctive characteristics including local values, traditions, and institutional arrangements of the specific social fabric.[559] As opposed to identifying phenomena as discrete and independent on the individual, organisational, and national levels, I analyse phenomena as holistic unities comprised

[559] Marina Kurkchiyan, 'Perceptions of Law and Social Order: A Cross-National Comparison of Collective Legal Consciousness' (2011) 29 Wisconsin International Law Journal 366.

of specific patterns that are simultaneously influenced by various contextual factors forming and evolving through time.

With a view of the conflict management approaches and contextual dynamics of management-labour relations in this 'East meets East' environment, I argue that the appeared lack of publicly expressed conflicts does not imply that the workplace was conflict free. There is little doubt that the Chinese and Burmese factory members did not perceive 'cultural differences' in terms of religious beliefs and social customs as significant barriers to collaboration. Even so, there were a number of issues at work arising from different perspectives. It was merely that factory members expressed their grievances in subtler ways, usually via passive-aggressive behaviour, and that the majority of grievances were not being voiced at all. Rather than studying industrial conflicts that are likely to result in industrial action, I devote my attention in this study to the tensions, both latent and manifest, that point to the differences in perceptions and behaviours between Chinese managers and Burmese workers.

1. Key Findings and Contributions with the Scholarship

As a result of my observations, I have identified some concepts that prove to be significant for illustrating management-labour relations in the workplace, and those concepts are leadership behaviour, rule-based governance, social order, reciprocity, fairness, and work ethic. What I have also identified as important is the role and

function of the Burmese supervisors and Chinese-Burmese interpreters as cultural intermediaries.

1.1 Leadership Behaviour and Rule-Based Governance

My research shows that different perceptions about leadership behaviour and governance approach may have a significant impact on the dynamics of management-labour relations. I contend that both Chinese managers and Burmese workers saw strong leadership as being autocratic. This is consistent with the argument made by scholars that autocratic leadership behaviour is still prevalent in many Asian cultures. However, analysing the findings, I argue that their expectations regarding the type of autocratic leadership differed. While most scholars have tried to distinguish between autocratic and non-autocratic forms of leadership,[560] only a few scholars, for example Flamholtz and Randle, have opted to use labels such as 'autocratic' and 'benevolent autocratic' to identify different autocratic styles, of which the 'benevolent autocratic' leader explains the rationale behind decisions, whereas an 'autocratic' leader does not.[561] Still, such methods of dichotomising leadership behaviour are rather crude and often lead to simplistic interpretations of leadership processes.

The work attitude displayed by Chinese managers at the workplace led me to suggest that the Chinese managers envisaged management-labour relations to be similar to parent-child relations. Their idea of strong leader is someone who acts like a 'strict

[560] Blake and Mouton (n 23); Kurt Lewin, Ronald Lippitt and Ralph K. White (n 22).
[561] Eric G Flamholtz and Yvonne Randle, *Growing Pains: Building Sustainably Successful Organizations* (John Wiley & Sons 2016).

parent' — displaying competence and governing the place with unquestionable authority. They were very directive, exercised their power in an autocratic manner, and expected absolute obedience from Burmese workers, whom they regarded as their submissive and incapable 'children.' Nevertheless, to soften their image as strict parents and to influence workers in a less coercive manner, they did sometimes explain the rationale for decisions through the practice resembling 'thought work.' In addition to issuing directives like an autocratic leader, they sought to display benevolence to workers by showing they understand what is best for the organisation and its people, therefore their behaviour exhibited characteristics of both 'autocratic' and 'benevolent autocratic' leadership styles.

As for the Burmese workers, I argue that their perception of a good leader is like an 'authoritative teacher.' The key difference in expectations between Burmese workers and Chinese managers is that the Burmese workers expected Chinese managers to be more relationship-oriented, in the sense that they would demonstrate concern for their subordinates and be considerate, helpful, and supportive. Yet, while scholarship suggests that a manager with relationship-oriented leadership style would seek input from subordinates and give due weight to their ideas,[562] Burmese workers showed obedience towards their managers and did not expect much participation. The expectations for Chinese managers were that they should be task-oriented in their leadership and provide solid instructions and clear directions to follow. As such, this research provides a nuanced picture of leadership expectations and demonstrates

[562] Fred E Fiedler (n 84); Tom Henkel, Jim Marion and Debra Bourdeau, 'Project Manager Leadership Behavior: Task-Oriented versus Relationship-Oriented' (2019) 18 Journal of Leadership Education.

how difficult it is to draw a line between different categories of leadership. Rather than relying on predefined leadership styles, I describe leadership behaviour and expectations within the context of actual environment where meaning making took place on a multilateral basis.

Regarding workplace governance, this research shows that there is a discrepancy between how Chinese managers and Burmese workers perceived the use of formal rules and procedures. Chinese managers implemented a 'systematic' approach to manage the workplace, promoting the use of extensive rules and treating the Burmese workers in a bureaucratic manner. To them, the rules serve as a legitimate and impartial mechanism for solving work problems, suppressing workers' objections, and stabilising the workplace. Their rigid application of rules, and their reaction to identified violations with punitive measures, is reflective of a high degree of formalism and coercion, and a high tendency towards using confrontational means to manage conflicts.[563] This contradicts the long-held assumption of Chinese people being relation-oriented and tending to be avoiding, accommodating, and compromising in their conflict resolution approach.[564]

However, my research argues that regulatory enforcement and conflict management behaviour is influenced by social contexts, so focusing on the dimensions and types

[563] See Lesley K McAllister, 'Dimensions of Enforcement Style: Factoring in Regulatory Autonomy and Capacity' (2010) 32 Law and Policy 61.
[564] Hwang, 'Guanxi and Mientze: Conflict Resolution in Chinese Society' (n 92); Peng, He and Zhu (n 93); Luo Lu and others, 'Work Stress, Chinese Work Values, and Work Well-Being in the Greater China' (2011) 151 Journal of Social Psychology 767.

of behavioural styles may lead us to neglect the significance of contextual variables. *'Guanxi'* is widely recognised as being deeply rooted in the core of Chinese culture and is undeniably an important social convention that influences the behaviour of Chinese people — for example, some scholars have argued that '*guanxi'* undermines formality and erodes the enforcement capacity of officials.[565] This research argues that the use and consequent influence of '*guanxi'* is highly context-specific. Since Chinese people tend to pull '*guanxi'* only from those higher up in the social hierarchy, [566] with the Chinese managers being in a position of power over the Burmese workers, it was possible for them to spare the trouble of pulling *'guanxi'* and act in a rigid, rule-based, and confrontational manner towards the Burmese workers when maintaining workplace discipline and handling workers' problems.

As for the Burmese workers, while most of them complied with the rules and agreed that they were necessary, their perspectives on rules were different, in that even the Burmese supervisors who enforced the rules themselves recognised the importance of a human dimension to allow for more flexibility and responsiveness in enforcing them. After examining the workplace dynamics, I argue that the Burmese workers, concerned about their own happiness and network of relations, would elect to place their sense of identity and agency above strict adherence to the rules, and there is a propensity to value informal and relation-oriented practices. The results of my research also demonstrate that attempts to explain behavioural tendencies need to

[565] Carlos Wing Hung Lo, Gerald E Fryxell and Benjamin Van Rooij, 'Changes in Enforcement Styles among Environmental Enforcement Officials in China' (2009) 41 Environment and Planning A 2706.
[566] Thomas Gold, Doug Guthrie and David Wank (eds), *Social Connections in China: Institutions, Culture, and the Changing Nature of Guanxi* (Cambridge University Press 2002).

take into account the specific context in which individuals are situated, thus one factor influencing Burmese workers' behaviour might have been the affective and contextual dimensions of interaction, especially the informal power exerted by the Chinese-Burmese interpreter through social dependence.

1.2 Social Order

In this thesis, I argue that the views on hierarchy can influence people's expectations and behaviours when dealing with work arrangements. Chinese managers wished to preserve workplace order based upon hierarchical differences in rank and command. Hierarchical system in this factory was essentially based on two principles: first, establishing a chain of command with supervisors at the middle level connecting top layer managers to bottom layer workers, and second, maintaining a leader-follower distance such that the Chinese managers had infrequent contact with the Burmese frontline workers and were physically distant from them. It is illustrative of how distance can perpetuate power as well as how power can perpetuate distance, as leaders can use those in more senior positions as a 'front' or a mouthpiece to sustain their power by remaining aloof, unaccountable, and unchallenged.[567] I argue that it might have been facilitated by their experiences in China's garment factories which had militaristic and segregation-based arrangements, as well as by their culturally shaped beliefs that social order is purely governed by hierarchical status.

[567] David Collinson, 'Questions of Distance' (2005) 1 Leadership 235.

Chinese managers and Burmese workers shared similarities in the way they endorsed hierarchy more than equality. Since both Chinese and Burmese societies are frequently described as 'collectivist,' in which hierarchical differences and vertical relationships are emphasised, and that roles, status, and appropriate behaviours are closely tied to position,[568] the observed tendency to support hierarchy appears to confirm the argument that cultural orientations such as individualism-collectivism shape social relations and determine how social order is organised.[569] However, my further findings demonstrate that Burmese workers actually had different views than Chinese managers in regard to how hierarchical social order should be practised.

The Burmese workers mostly tolerated the organisational hierarchy. Yet, possibly as a result of Burmese socio-cultural beliefs that value alternate forms of power in addition to hierarchical positions, they tended to dismantle boundaries and downplay the significance of the hierarchical distinctions formally established by the organisation. Thus, while the Chinese management used pecuniary compensation for incentive purposes to motivate workers to advance through the hierarchy, this method was largely inapplicable to the Burmese context. Through their agency at work, Burmese workers preferred to narrow the distance between leaders and followers, as they regularly circumvented the chain of command and skipped work communication procedures. They also tried to exercise agency over their sense of

[568] David Matsumoto, 'Cultural Similarities and Differences in Display Rules' (1990) 14 Motivation and Emotion 195.
[569] Jiyoung Park and others (n 115); Ryan M Vogel and others, 'A Cross-Cultural Examination of Subordinates' Perceptions of and Reactions to Abusive Supervision' (2015) 36 Journal of Organizational Behavior 720; Jose H Vargas and Markus Kemmelmeier, 'Ethnicity and Contemporary American Culture: A Meta-Analytic Investigation of Horizontal-Vertical Individualism-Collectivism' (2013) 44 Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology 195.

identity, as they were willing to flexibly negotiate their identities in order to transcend formal hierarchy-based and role-based expectations.

1.3 Reciprocity, Fairness, and Work Ethic

First, based on the findings of my research, I argue that the Chinese managers and Burmese workers had different views of how reciprocity should be conceptualised and implemented. In contrast to studies of distributive justice which focus mostly on the equality or inequality of the benefits given or received, my research builds on the ideas of Molm, Schaefer, and Collett to argue that reciprocity should also be analysed based on utilitarian and communicative values.[570]

Distributive justice researchers have generally overlooked the symbolic message enclosed within distribution decisions, and the minimal interaction paradigm adopted by previous researchers oversimplifies the nature of people's social interactions and fails to recognise how these factors influence distribution decisions.[571] In order to focus on the social context, in this research I employ *'renqing*,' a concept identified by scholars as the prevalent norm of social relationships among Chinese people, to explain how Chinese managers understood reciprocity as a concrete obligation between two parties, and that they expected bilateral flow of reciprocal benefits to be strictly balanced between receiving and giving. As a result, they

[570] Molm, Schaefer and Collett (n 407).
[571] Zhang (n 441).

considered the alleged non-reciprocal behaviour of Burmese workers as 'selfish' acts that pose serious threat to workplace relations.

I argue, however, that there is no ground to conclude the Burmese workers were 'selfish.' On the other hand, they simply observed different rules of reciprocity. Unlike Chinese managers, Burmese workers were not expecting reciprocity to be concrete rules of bilateral material exchange. I argue that the concept of reciprocity in the Burmese context embodied more flexibility to the dynamics of social exchange activity, such that benefits may flow in a holistic network, and reciprocity may be practiced differently, depending on the actors involved. As Chinese managers forced their philosophy of reciprocity practices on Burmese workers through factory rules, they deprived Burmese workers of the power to determine their own social relationships and shape workplace dynamics.

Second, in a similar manner to the approach taken to reciprocity in this study, my examination of the perceptions of fairness and justice goes beyond concepts such as distributive, procedural, and interactional justice. Scholarship generally does not investigate the impact of contextual factors on the criteria that are employed to determine what is fair, but in this research, I investigate the actual interactions taking place in the specific social circumstances of this Chinese-run garment factory. I show that Chinese managers afforded differential treatment to Burmese workers on the basis of equity and pragmatic concerns. In keeping with their agenda of meritocracy,

Chinese managers proclaimed to allocate rewards and enforce rules flexibly when it came to workers who were superior in terms of ability, performance, and contribution.

The findings of my study demonstrate, however, that even though the Burmese workers were rather relation-oriented, their perception of fairness was different from Chinese managers in the sense that they had more of an egalitarian tendency. Perhaps owing to Buddhist values and socialist era work practices, Burmese workers' fairness perception was influenced by the idea of equality of opportunity and treatment for all regardless of performance, which means a less competitive work culture and greater cooperation and mutual support between workers.

Third, this research demonstrates that the Burmese workers had a different work ethic than the Chinese managers. I argue that although scholarship offers contrasting views on what shapes individual work values, these differences can be reconciled because both contextual influences and the stage of development of industrial capitalism can be accounted for in the formation of work ethic.

Based on my findings, Chinese managers largely relied on extrinsic benefits to motivate their employees, and this confirms the industrial capitalism argument that in modern China, financial and materialistic rewards are very salient due to the economic reforms and educational reforms requiring people to adjust to market-driven competition.[572] My research offers a more comprehensive perspective by

[572] Chunyu Zhang and Andreas Hirschi, 'Forget about the Money? A Latent Profile Analysis of Calling and Work Motivation in Chinese Employees' (2021) 26 Career Development International 105; Jiaming

examining the influence of socio-cultural and historical factors. I discuss how Chinese managers drew parallels between factory and 'home,' as well as how their work ethic led them to expect Burmese workers to be fully prepared to self-sacrifice for the good of the 'home.'

As a stark contrast, Burmese workers, perhaps influenced by the Buddhist ethics and work practices of the socialist era, retained strong feelings of entitlement in respect of employee benefits and work arrangements, even if they had very little knowledge of legally protected labour rights. This mismatch in work expectations contributed to feelings of resentment on both the Chinese and Burmese sides. Nevertheless, my research shows that the Burmese workers had gradually adapted to the work culture of the Chinese managers, as the factory was able to impart Chinese work ethics and practices to the workers.

1.4 Cultural Intermediaries

The Burmese supervisors were locally recruited employees in this factory to facilitate the process of staff localisation. They provided contribution to this cross-cultural work environment like how other scholars have described — by understanding local conditions, crossing cultural boundaries to manage local operations, and utilising empathy and understanding in their supervisory technique to influence behaviour of local staff.

Sun and Xun Wang, 'Value Differences between Generations in China: A Study in Shanghai' (2010) 13 Journal of Youth Studies 65.

The ethnographic approach I used in my research provides a uniquely vivid illustration of the issues encountered by Burmese supervisors. Due to their special status and identification with both Chinese managers and Burmese staff, they experienced internal contradictions and tensions. Although Burmese supervisors attempted to remain close to the frontline workers and to be flexible in addressing their concerns, they had also adopted some work values and practices of Chinese management by adhering to factory rules and imposing production goals on frontline workers, thus prioritising organisational system and workplace hierarchy over needs of individual workers. By analysing the socio-cultural contexts and power dynamics, I show that when it came to bridging the communication gap between Chinese managers and frontline Burmese workers, Burmese supervisors were reluctant to risk their relationships with management, as they readily disidentified with the workers and therefore failed to advocate for their interests.

My findings in regard to the Chinese-Burmese interpreters are consistent with studies that indicate how interpreters undertake numerous cultural brokerage and mediatory functions in addition to translating. The Chinese-Burmese interpreters in this factory, however, represent a unique opportunity to explore the intriguing means by which biculturality can manifest itself, since they are an interesting group of bicultural people with the necessary linguistic and cultural skills to interact with both Chinese and Burmese and their shifting patterns of relationships. By navigating two sets of relationships, the Chinese-Burmese interpreters were able to bridge the cultural and

communication gap between Chinese managers and Burmese workers, while maintaining their unique bicultural identity and sense of belonging to Burmese people. Throughout the factory, they spanned intersectional boundaries, as they floated between sections, to facilitate communication as well as to serve as an engine that fuelled production. Based on my findings, I argue that in addition to their enabling role, which is often discussed in scholarship, they also became adjusted to management expectations of harmony and order. Assuming a restraining role, they used different non-coercive and mediating strategies to dissolve grievance feelings and suppress the expression and communication of grievances across boundaries.

2. Advantages of Legal Culture Approach

This research contributes to the current literature on management-labour relations and organisational dynamics by opening the fields to new possibilities. With an ethnographic approach, this research explores an organisation based on observations and insights of actual behaviour, and thus provides in-depth qualitative analysis that extends knowledge about interactions in the cross-cultural setting. Many previous studies on cross-cultural business encounter appear to have focused largely on the effects of culture *per se*, rather than cultural differences.[573] Incorporating theoretical contributions from the socio-legal literature, the legal culture approach generates context driven questions for this ethnographic study and bring to light the differences

[573] Ji Li, Leonard Karakowsky and Kevin Lam, 'East Meets East and East Meets West: The Case of Sino-Japanese and Sino-West Joint Ventures in China' (2002) 39 Journal of Management Studies 841.

in ideas about leadership, rule-based governance, social order, reciprocity, fairness, and work ethics.

This research contributes to the scholarship of legal culture by exploring the interplay of different patterns of culturally influenced attitude and behaviour, as we can see how the expression, experience, and negotiation of such differences determine to a large extent the dynamics of this Chinese-Burmese encounter in the Chinese-run garment factory. Since studies of legal culture are mostly concerned with either investigating a single unit of culture or using a cross-cultural comparative approach, this research challenges the existing analytical frameworks and conceptualisations by using legal culture as a methodological approach to explore, locate, and interpret nuances in cross-cultural interactions. The objective of my thesis is to illustrate the complex and multi-dimensional nature of contextual phenomena in cross-cultural environment by emphasising the multitude of connections and interdependencies between our individual perceptions and the more stable paradigms of history, traditions, and socio-economic relations that define our views on ethics, interpersonal relationships, and social order.

This study goes beyond the well-researched collaboration between East and West to examine the impact of Chinese investment in another fast-growing Asian country, which reveals a new type of management-labour relationship between Chinese expatriate managers and non-Chinese workers. As I have discussed, apart from the issue of mutual adaptation, communication patterns in Chinese-run enterprises

overseas are vastly different from those in their Western counterparts, since Chinese and non-Chinese Asian members lack a common language. In light of the fact that much of this 'East meets East' cross-cultural work environment remains underexplored, this research involving thick description and in-depth illustration that explicates culturally situated meanings provides a novel perspective for understanding the dynamics of this emerging form of management-labour relations.

Moreover, this research raises implications for organisations that venture overseas to recruit local employees. Cross-cultural training for expatriate managers is usually about providing knowledge of the external cultural environment, studying important cultural incidents, and enhancing ability to adapt to the host country's communication style.[574] As indicated by my research, however, problematic cultural differences are not about languages or religions, but rather about deeper levels of thinking, and tensions in cross-cultural work environments are a result of such subtle differences in expectations, value systems, and worldviews. Since such differences are often difficult to notice, let alone overcome, expatriate managers may fail to realise that the problem is a cultural one, and they may too easily dismiss host country employees as incompetent or uncooperative.

Finally, contrary to the popular belief that cultural intermediaries are facilitators, I argue that they can actually repress employees' expressions of voice. This employee silence can be detrimental to organisations and lead to passive aggressive behaviour.

[574] John O Okpara and Jean D Kabongo, 'Cross-Cultural Training and Expatriate Adjustment: A Study of Western Expatriates in Nigeria' (2011) 46 Journal of World Business 22.

Therefore, employers who rely on the assistance of locally recruited intermediaries cannot take them for granted. It is necessary for employers to periodically evaluate their performance and assess the extent of their influence. As shown in my research, influenced by power relations intrinsic to the organisation, cultural intermediaries may not be promoting mutual agreement, and they may lack the ability and determination to help people harness their power to manage differences. Fostering practices that encourage open communication will require transformation of power dynamics and empowerment of cultural intermediaries. Providing intermediaries with the freedom to exercise creative discretion, as well as sharing information with them and increasing their involvement in decision-making will facilitate the transformation of a workplace into one that is more open, trust-based, and collaborative.

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