

**THE WORK STRESS OF CHINESE SENIOR EXECUTIVES:
WORK STRESSORS AND COPING STRATEGIES**

By Zheng (Daniel) Duan

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Abstract

Along with rapid economic development, work stress has become a serious issue in China, especially for senior executives who are steering their organisations in this turbulent and complex social environment. The Chinese economy is transitioning from being centrally planned towards a more market-orientated one, where political and market forces continue to work closely together. As these economic changes challenge traditional values such as harmony and *guanxi*, Chinese senior executives who work within these environments and manage these workplace transitions become an interesting focus of attention worthy of deeper research. While our knowledge about work stress is mainly based on research in Western societies, how work stress manifests itself in a transitional economy like China is underexplored.

Drawing on cognitive appraisal theory, this study examines the work stress of Chinese senior executives. Work stress is not only caused by stressors but is also influenced by the efficacy of coping. As an individual can cope with a stressor in different ways depending on the resources possessed by the individual, this study is interested in the relationship between coping resources and coping strategies. Therefore, it asks two research questions: *What stressors do Chinese senior executives experience in their work environment? How do Chinese senior executives utilise resources to cope with their work stress?*

This study draws on phenomenology as a philosophical lens to explore the work stress of Chinese senior executives as stress is conceptualised as a subjective personal experience, the investigation of which needs to be based on the phenomenological assumption that reality is based on perception and interpretation of the external world. In addressing the research questions, a sample of Chinese senior executive within private, public, and mixed ownership organisations were interviewed using Critical Incident Technique (CIT) to capture contextual details critical for identifying stressors and coping strategies. Research data was analysed using six phases of thematic analysis.

This study contributes to extant literature by providing insights into the work stressors and coping strategies that Chinese senior executives face and employ. Findings highlight the relevance of both organisational and environmental factors in shaping performance uncertainty that give rise to the work stress of Chinese senior executives. Moreover,

political-business role conflict linked to the one-party state is identified as a distinctive work stressor in the Chinese context – a work stressor that has hitherto not been identified in the work stress literature. Furthermore, whereas previous literature predominantly focuses on workplace interpersonal conflicts as a major work stressor, this study identifies an additional interpersonal stressor: the challenge of maintaining workplace interpersonal harmony. Finally, while previous research of career-related stressors mainly focuses on negative, confining career experiences, this study reveals that Chinese senior executives often identify challenging work goals in their desire for career success.

As for coping, prior research has mainly focused on individual coping, with less attention afforded to collective and social coping. This study finds that collective coping is supported by job resources (within the organisation) and that social coping is underpinned by social resources (external to the organisation). A specific focus of this study was to examine how job and social resources are utilised to implement collective and social coping. Findings reveal that job and social resources facilitate problem-focused strategies in both collective and social coping. By contrast, these resources are barely used to facilitate emotion-focused and meaning-focused strategies in both collective and social coping. Research has shown that effective coping is determined by coping flexibility and that multiple coping strategies are utilised flexibly according to different situations. However, the asymmetric pattern of collective and social coping found in this study indicates that Chinese senior executives may not fully benefit from coping in the organisational and social domain.

Overall, this study builds on cognitive appraisal theory by identifying several contextually situated work stressors and explaining the connections between coping resources and coping strategies within the framework of collective and social coping. In doing so, the study provides new insights into work stress in the Chinese context, where Chinese senior executives are required to meet many contradictory expectations in a rapidly changing society.

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List of Abbreviations:

AHDI	Average Household Disposable Income
CCP	The Chinese Communist Party
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CIT	Critical Incident Technique
COR	Conservation of Resource
EU-OSHA	The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work
Eurofound	The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions
IPO	Initial Public Offering
JD-R	Job Demand-Resource
MOEs	Mixed-Ownership Enterprises
NBSPRC	National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China
POEs	Private-Owned Enterprises
ROGI	Regulations on Open Government Information
SASAC	Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council
SCPRC	The State Council of the People's Republic of China
SOEs	State-Owned Enterprises
WHO	World Health Organization
WUST	Wuhan University of Science and Technology

Chapter 1: Introducing the Research

Work stress is a subjective experience of psychological tension in dealing with some adverse work conditions, such as time pressure and excessive workload, when the worker has limited resources and control (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Work stress is associated with negative consequences and so reducing it benefits individual well-being, organisational performance, and the prosperity of society. Research shows that stress at work can cause physical and psychological strains, including gastrointestinal complaints, fatigue (J. Li et al., 2016), musculoskeletal pain (Herr et al., 2015), heart diseases (Kivimäki et al., 2015), anxiety, depression (Thun et al., 2014), and burnout (L. Chen et al., 2018). Indeed, it was estimated that work stress resulted in a loss of 12.8 million working days in the UK in 2018 (HSE, 2020) and cost American businesses US\$187 billion in 2011 (Goh et al., 2015).

Academic research about work stress is mainly based in Western contexts. Despite high work intensity in Asian societies, work stress research in this Eastern context has not received sufficient attention (Cooke et al., 2020). This research investigates work stress of Chinese senior executives in China (mainland) to address this empirical gap. More importantly, what makes a person feel stressed depends on the sociocultural context - what is important to the person and that gives meanings to the consequence of loss, threat, or challenge (Chun et al., 2006) is specific to that context. By drawing on the unique sociocultural context of China, this research explores *stressors* inherent in the Chinese workplace.

Cognitive appraisal theory makes it clear that work stress is a subjective experience, not only depending on the perception of work stressors but also the efficacy of *coping* (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Although which coping strategy is more effective remains unresolved in research, a meta-analysis of 175 empirical studies indicates that coping flexibility is positively related to psychological adjustment (C. Cheng et al., 2014). This finding corresponds to cognitive appraisal theory in that the efficacy of coping hinges on the range of coping strategies and the likelihood of implementing a suitable coping strategy or a set of strategies to address different situational demands (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Thus, this research also explores the process of how coping resources are utilised

to manage work stress. This introductory chapter provides an overview of the research, explaining the rationale underpinning the research questions and outlining the overall structure of the thesis.

1.1 Work stress across the globe and China

Work stress is a rising issue globally. The estimated number of employees suffering from work-related stress, anxiety, and depression in the UK increased from 440,000 in 2014 to 602,000 in 2018 (HSE, 2020). Similarly, work stress levels in New Zealand rose from 2.69 in 2014 to 3.08 in 2018, on a scale between 1 and 5 on which a higher number indicates a higher level of stress (BusinessNZ & Southern Cross Health Society, 2019). In a similar vein, a national survey in Canada showed that the percentage of respondents who reported high levels of stress was 57% in 2011, which was slightly higher than 54% in 2001 and significantly higher than 44% in 1991 (Duxbury & Higgins, 2012). The prevalence of work stress is not only documented at the country level, according to a report from the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) and the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA, 2014), 25% of European workers experienced work stress for all or almost all of their working hours in 2010. A report on worldwide workplace stress argues that combating work stress should be a collective effort involving both organisational and social interventions (International Labour Organization, 2016). Unfortunately, even for the advanced economies in Europe, only less than a third of enterprises have procedures in place to deal with the issue of work stress (EU-OSHA & Eurofound, 2014).¹ Burnout, the syndrome caused by chronic work stress has been classified as an occupational phenomenon in the International Classification of Diseases by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2019).

The magnitude and impact of work stress is also a rising issue within China. Work stress is a complex phenomenon especially in contemporary China where society is rapidly changing. Since the economic reform and opening-up in the late 1970s, China has achieved epic economic success with a dramatic GDP growth from 178 billion in 1978 to more than 13 trillion in 2018 (The World Bank, 2020). However, behind this rapid

¹ The survey was conducted in 2009, involving 36,000 computer-assisted telephone interviews in 31 countries (the 27 EU Member States at the time plus Croatia, Norway, Switzerland, and Turkey).

economic development, the issue of work stress appears to be particularly salient in China. An international survey showed that 75% of workers in China reported an increase in stress from 2011 to 2012, whereas the global average of workers experiencing an increase in stress was still high at 48%, but much lower than 75% (China Daily, 2012). A more recent study by Wuhan University of Science and Technology (WUST, 2018) indicated that over 80% of Chinese employees suffered from a moderate or high level of physical and psychological stress at work. Chinese senior executives appear to be a high-risk group for work stress in China. A survey indicated that 78% of Chinese senior executives reported a high level of work stress (S. Luo & Wang, 2018). Correspondingly, the media frequently reports high-profile suicide cases of Chinese senior executives (e.g. six consecutive suicides in half a year during 2014) with speculation that excessive work stress is the main cause (Fu, 2014). Work stress has been considered a major cause of depression in China (Hsiao, 2020). An acquaintance of mine, who was a senior executive, committed suicide in the workplace, and this reaffirmed to me the imperative of studying work stress in China (Cooke et al., 2020; Higgins et al., 2008). Based on a review of human resource management research, Cooke et al. (2020) note that workplace well-being research has received limited attention in the Asian context, although China, Japan, and Korea represent a high level of work intensity in particular. Especially for China, the transition from a centrally planned to more market-oriented economy has brought about significant social changes, such as more uncertainty and competitiveness (Hsiao, 2020). How Chinese people perceive and manage their work stress has important theoretical and practical implications.

1.2 Overview of the research

Seen through the lens of cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the experience of work stress is influenced by both stressors and coping. While stressors usually refer to situations that provoke a sense of loss, threat, or challenge, coping is concerned with cognitive and behavioural efforts to alleviate the feelings of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Cognitive appraisal theory postulates that how people decide to cope depends on the coping resources they possess. Although the theory acknowledges that the appraisal of a specific stressor also influences the use of coping strategies, coping is a dynamic process as the situation and people's appraisal of it evolve constantly (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Subsequent studies have found that it is unlikely for people

to just use one coping strategy to deal with a specific stressor (Nicholls & Polman, 2008; Young et al., 2014). Instead, people use a set of coping strategies over the course of a stressful situation (Nicholls & Polman, 2008; Young et al., 2014). Therefore, rather than investigating the relationship between work stressors and coping strategies, this study focuses on work stressors emanating from the distinctive Chinese workplace and the relationship between coping resources and coping strategies in the Chinese context.

With regard to work stressors, early research has divided work stressors into six major categories, including intrinsic job characteristics, role in the organisation, interpersonal issues, career development, organisational factors, and home-work interface (Cartwright & Cooper, 1997; Cooper, Cooper, et al., 1988; Cooper et al., 2001). Subsequent research tended to examine the relevance of these stressors in Chinese society by employing quantitative questionnaires developed in Western research (C. Q. Lu et al., 2009; L. Lu et al., 2003). Surprisingly, there is little attempt by researchers to inductively explore work stressors in the unique Chinese context from the view of Chinese people. The Western literature tends to look at micro job conditions generated within the internal environment of organisations, while it ignores how the macro institutional and cultural contexts can influence work stress. For example, China is characterised by its one-party ruling political system, transitional economy, and traditional values. This distinct combination of institutional and cultural contexts provides a fertile ground for expanding and enriching the work stress literature. For example, the current party-building movement seems to increase the workload of Chinese senior executives with political affiliations with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (L. Y.-H. Lin et al., 2019; C. Xu & Feng, 2020). In a similar vein, frequent organisational changes resulting from economic reforms, regulatory changes, and increasing competition appear to challenge the traditional value of interpersonal harmony and group solidarity in the Chinese workplace (X. Chen, 2018; C. Q. Lu et al., 2009). Researchers have advocated that inductive research should be conducted in the Eastern context to acquire culturally sensitive knowledge to advance the management and organisation literature (Barkema et al., 2015; C. Yao et al., 2020).

Another focus of this research is coping, broadly defined as cognitive and behavioural responses to alleviate stress (Folkman, 1984; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It is important to incorporate coping in stress research because coping influences the degree of stress.

This research is guided by cognitive appraisal theory, which posits that psychological stress is determined by primary and secondary appraisals. While work stressors trigger the primary appraisal by which people sense a threat, loss, challenge, or simply something at stake, coping is the main purpose of the secondary appraisal. That is, people evaluate their coping resources and think over how to apply the resources to cope with their stress. Unfortunately, prior research on coping with work stress predominantly focuses on the effectiveness of coping strategies and coping resources respectively. There is a dearth of research looking into the relationship between coping resources and coping strategies (Dewe, 2017; Yaniv & Rabenu, 2017), especially in the collective/social way of coping.

Prior research on coping with work stress primarily focuses on individual coping strategies such as working harder or distancing from the stressor, researchers urge for more attention on the collective/social way of coping (C. B. Cox et al., 2015; Rodríguez et al., 2019). The boundary between collective coping and social coping is yet to be clearly established. Only a few studies have made adequate attempts to define collective coping as the collegial effort of managing work stress within the organisation (Peiró, 2008; Rodríguez et al., 2019). From this perspective, collective coping refers to coping strategies involving job resources provided by the organisation or its members. However, there is still a lack of systematic investigation of social coping assisted by coping resources available outside of the organisation which are defined as social resources in this study. In responding to the call for more research on the collective/social way of coping, a major focus of this research is to understand how collective coping and social coping manifest themselves in China.

A specific occupational group that warrant attention is Chinese senior executives. Senior executives have the primary job responsibilities of managing the interface between the organisation and the environment (Masli et al., 2016) and coordinating different internal stakeholders (Birkinshaw et al., 2017). This responsibility ideally encapsulates the complexity of the Chinese workplace as well as its external environment. Research shows that despite serving a critical, burdensome managerial role, senior executives suffer the least work stress as compared with middle-level and frontline managers (Ivancevich et al., 1982; Lokke & Madsen, 2014; L. Lu et al., 1999). This finding suggests that senior executives might have a better capacity to utilise their coping resources to deal with a wide range of stressors. Understanding how they cope with their work stress therefore

has great potential to shed light on collective coping and social coping. Interestingly, the work stress literature has investigated both employees and frontline or middle-level managers but there is little empirical research of senior executives (Guedes et al., 2017; Petru & Jarosova, 2019). Although there are a number of studies about managerial stress, they share the pitfall of treating managers as a homogeneous group without stratifying managerial levels (e.g. Lindorff, 2001; O'Neill & Davis, 2011; Yong et al., 2013). To enrich our understanding of Chinese senior executives' work stress, this study focuses on their work stressors as well as coping strategies.

1.3 Thesis outline

This thesis consists of eight chapters. The current chapter introduces work stress and the research rationale. Chapter 2 discusses Chinese institutional and cultural contexts in relation to work stress as work stress researchers have pointed to the importance of incorporating a cultural perspective in stress research since culture can influence how people perceive and respond to stress (Chun et al., 2006). Likewise, the institutional environment can not only generate demands, such as organisational changes due to regulatory changes (Beausaert et al., 2016), but also provide resources for coping, such as the legal system for formal conflict resolution (Aldwin, 2007). Chapter 3 defines work stress and introduces the theoretical framework guiding this study. It subsequently reviews the literature on work stressors and coping so as to clarify research gaps and formulate the research questions. Chapter 4 elaborates on the study's research philosophy, research design, sampling, data collection, and data analysis. Two chapters report on the research findings. Chapter 5 presents findings on work stressors that answer the first research question, while Chapter 6 reports findings on coping resources and coping strategies that answer the second research question. Chapter 7 discusses key findings and contains a section specifically discussing how the Chinese context influences the work stress experienced by Chinese senior executives. Lastly, Chapter 8 is the conclusion chapter, summarising key contributions to knowledge, discussing practical implications of research findings, reflecting on research limitations, and suggesting future research directions.

Chapter 2: The Chinese Institutional and Cultural Context

2.1 Introduction

Cultural and institutional contexts constitute the foundation upon which new concepts and theories are developed (Barkema et al., 2015). As the great majority of concepts and theories of management and organisation were established in Western contexts (Barkema et al., 2015), researchers call for more research drawing on Eastern contexts (Jia et al., 2012; C. Yao et al., 2020). Barkema et al. (2015) assume three possible outcomes of taking this research approach. Firstly, there is “construct equivalence” which means that the same construct from a Western context is merely given a local nomenclature of an Eastern context with no change of its form and function. Secondly, there is “construct salience” which refers to a particular Western construct being more important in the Eastern context. Thirdly, there is “construct infusion” which is to make an existing construct richer and nuanced by adding a new dimension or idea from the Eastern context. Barkema et al. (2015) attest that construct equivalence has little value in terms of theoretical contributions, whereas construct salience and particularly construct infusion result in good theoretical contributions. Similarly, Whetten (2009) proposes two different tracks of theoretical contributions. On the one hand, he proposes “theories *in* context” which means that the use of a Western theory in an Eastern context can provide novel insights into the subject of research. On the other hand, he identifies “theories *of* context”, a context which advances theories by formulating new theories or improving existing theories through observations in a novel context. Taken together, context-sensitive research is a critical path for theoretical advancement.

A context that facilitates theoretical advancement takes into account a particular place and time (Barkema et al., 2015). China has been undergoing an economic transition from state-planning to market-orientation. As its cultural and institutional environments differ from Western societies to a large extent, drawing on this unique context provides fruitful insights for expanding the knowledge of work stress. This chapter provides an overview of the Chinese institutional and cultural context in relation to the work stress of Chinese senior executives.

2.2 Institutional context of work stress

Institutional theory suggests that enterprises strive to conform to institutional expectations and norms in order to gain legitimacy and resources for their survival (Y. Yang et al., 2019). As senior executives are leaders who navigate their enterprises through a complex environment, the institutional context is an important context for understanding their work stress. The institutional environment consists of political, legal, economic, and social institutions (Q. Yin & Li, 2020). Because the Chinese cultural context overlaps with social institutions, this section mainly focuses on Chinese political, legal, and economic institutional environments.

2.2.1 Political obligations and capital

There are different views about the institutional logic behind the recent development of the Chinese economy. Some scholars argue that China runs under State Capitalism (Herrala & Jia, 2015; N. Lin, 2010b), while the Chinese government officially claims that its economic development is guided by Socialism with Chinese characteristics. Nevertheless, other scholars hold a dialectic view that the economic reform of China incorporates characteristics of both Socialism and Capitalism (Boer & Li, 2015; Kolodko, 2018). Despite this ongoing debate, there is little doubt about the influence of the CCP on the nation's economy (J. Wang & Tan, 2020).

While boosting the popularity, relevance, and appeal of the CCP (referred from this point as the party) amongst young professionals has been a continuous political goal (Thornton, 2012), since 2015, the CCP has introduced a *Dangjian* or party-building reform to strengthen the CCP's leadership in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) (L. Y.-H. Lin et al., 2019). New regulations such as "a trial regulation on the work at primary-level Party organisations of state-owned enterprises" was set up to formalise CCP leadership in corporate governance, the setup of Party organisations, and party members' duties and education in SOEs (Xinhua Net, 2020a). L. Y.-H. Lin and Milhaupt (2020) classify party-building specifications into three groups. The first, symbolic party-building provisions, includes following the constitution of the CCP, establishing an internal party committee, and providing financial support for party activities. The second, decision-making provisions, stipulates that the board or the management should consult the party committee prior to making important decisions, such as corporate strategies, mergers and

acquisitions, organisational restructuring, employee rights and social responsibilities (The State Council of the People's Republic of China [SCPRC], 2020). Lastly, personnel provisions oversee the appointment of important managerial posts in enterprises, such as the CCP having the power to nominate directors and managers, dual appointment of top executives in the firm and representatives in the party committee, and a dual role of chairman and party secretary. Although the party-building movement is primarily targeted at SOEs, a significant number of private-owned enterprises (POEs) have also complied with these new rules voluntarily because of the perceived benefits of political connection, such as better access to bank loans and capital markets (L. Y.-H. Lin et al., 2019).

Symbolic party-building activities appear to be a major demand in the Chinese workplace. Based on the analysis of corporate charters of 1046 listed firms in China, L. Y.-H. Lin and Milhaupt (2020) show that the average rate of adopting the decision-making provisions and personnel provisions by SOEs and POEs is around 50%, whereas the average adopting rate of the symbolic provisions accounts for over 95%.

Chinese senior executives in SOEs are usually party-members (L.-W. Lin, 2017), which means that they are obligated to participate in or organise party-building activities. Party-building nowadays appears to be a very demanding task. While in Mao's era, party-building mainly involved ritualistic and rigid activities, such as comprehending new principles from the central Party committee, political study, and criticism and self-criticism,² the new party-building movement values activities that are engaging, interactive, diverse, informative, and outside the workplace (Thornton, 2012). Imbued with a political theme, a number of recreational activities such as "sports, singing competition, speech contests, sightseeing trips, and even blind dates, are organized periodically" (Yan & Huang, 2017, p. 54). While Chinese senior executives need to respond to the requirement of organising or participating in party-building activities, they are also directly responsible for the economic performance of enterprises. As a result, Chinese senior executives with the party membership seem to be overburdened by such political obligations.

² Criticism and self-criticism are "meant to facilitate the open airing of differences among Party members and encourage the discussion of alternative policies" (Dittmer, 1973, p. 709).

Furthermore, as the aim of this party-building approach is to exercise more control over business operations and management (C. Xu & Feng, 2020), it can place an emphasis on the political agenda over commercial logic with business decision-making. SOE senior executives are required to study new principles, policies, and resolutions of the CCP and then translate them into business strategies and practices (J. Wang, 2014). As political and business goals can be incompatible at times (Shleifer & Vishny, 1994), Chinese senior executives who are party members may be susceptible to conflicting expectations. For example, the regime of stability maintenance was set up since early 1990s in China to minimise political and social instability caused by various forms of social unrest, including labour disputes and strikes (Benney, 2016; D. L. Yang, 2017a). Since maintaining social stability is an important political duty, corporate restructuring and changes that involve redundancy, individual performance appraisal, and reducing expenditure on the welfare of employees in favour of better corporate efficiency and performance may provoke employee resistance and protest. Especially, because Chinese SOEs are generally not performing very well economically as compared to POEs, there is a greater pressure of reform for SOE senior executives (H. Yu, 2019). However, organisational reform is no easy task since the need to maintain social stability may clash with the need to pursue changes for better profit-making. As a result, the increase in political influence on business operations and management has increased for SOE senior executives in recent years.

Within the transitional economy where market rules and laws are still developing, personal ties or *guanxi* with government officials is an important source of social capital for business success in China (Gibb & Zhang, 2017; H. Wang et al., 2011). Regarding SOEs, they seem to enjoy the advantage of having a better access to various institutional resources, such as project approvals, business licences, lands, subsidies, and better deals for bank loans, due to their structural connection with the government (W. Yin & Matthews, 2017; D. Zhang & Freestone, 2013). Particularly, SOEs tend to enjoy low pay-out rates to the state and receive a large portion of dividend returns from the government (J. Zhang et al., 2017). As a result, they are less concerned about financial strain (H. Yu, 2019). For example, Sinosteel Corporation, a central SOE, failed to pay due interest of RMB 2 billion to its bondholders in 2015 and the government stepped in to request a postponement instead of immediate redemption (Maliszewski et al., 2016). In terms of

POEs, H. Wang et al. (2011) observe that business owners strategically recruit former government officials into their top management teams and use their *guanxi* with government officials to deal with external uncertainty. Research also shows that given the powerful role of the Chinese government in supervising outbound foreign direct investments, Chinese POEs with politically connected top executives are more likely to complete a cross-broader deal of merger and acquisition than their counterparts with no such connections (Schweizer et al., 2019). Therefore, political connection seems to be an important resource for addressing the performance pressure.

It is worth noting that the use of political connection for addressing performance pressure is contingent on the administrative environment (Peng & Luo, 2000). With the unprecedented anticorruption movement and tighter administrative discipline in recent years, the effect of political connection on removing institutional barriers for obtaining institutional resources may be less pervasive (Ren & Zhao, 2020). A recent study found that more risk-averse Chinese CEOs tend to invest less in establishing and maintaining political connections (Oppen et al., 2017). Thus, government officials nowadays might consciously refrain their social connection with senior executives to avoid suspicion of rent-seeking behaviours. This implies that political connection may become a less important resource for coping with the stress of maintaining corporate performance in the current political atmosphere in China.

In short, the political party-building movement has placed significant obligations on Chinese senior executives due to the challenge of fulfilling both political and business obligations. Nevertheless, political connection can be a powerful resource to counteract the stress derived from maintaining corporate performance in a transitional economy.

2.2.2 The challenge of adapting to a turbulent legal environment

The Chinese legal environment is characterised by its ambiguity, blankness, and instability in law (S. Li, 2007). Firstly, the problem of legal ambiguity is caused by unclear provisions and conflicting legal rules. Secondly, blankness in law refers to a lack of detailed rules of implementation, while there are merely general principles. Lastly, instability in law means frequent revisions and changes of legislation (S. Li, 2007). Take Company Law as an example, according to the State Administration for Market Regulation (2018), the law was not promulgated until 1993 but it has undergone five

revisions in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2013, and 2018 respectively. The magnitude of revisions is very significant. For instance, the amendment taking effect in 2005 involved 120 articles,³ which “thoroughly changes the rules for company management and operation in China” (S. Li, 2007, p. 23).

This turbulent legal environment challenges the adaptation and survival of businesses. For example, for combating the rising issue of myopia in China, the Ministry of Education urged regulators to limit the number of new online games, reduce the time young people spend on online games, and establish an age-appropriate system for players in 2018. After this official announcement, Tencent, a leading enterprise in the gaming industry lost more than \$160 billion of their share value due to the regulatory uncertainty (Roantree & Glenn, 2018). Likewise, along with the mounting pollution issue, the Chinese government introduced the Environmental Protection Tax Law in 2018, imposing tax on enterprises and public institutions (J. Wu & Tal, 2018). The new law resulted in a negative stock market reaction soon after its legislative day because of the perceived increase of environmental compliance costs (Y. He et al., 2020). In responding to the fast-changing legislative landscape in China, Chinese senior executives are now required to proactively scan and manage the legal environment and prepare for necessary organisational changes.

2.2.3 A more diverse economy with various challenges

China’s economy has been in transition. The country has shifted from a purely planned economy to a mixed economy, containing various ownership types of enterprises, such as SOEs, POEs, collective-owned enterprises (COEs), and joint ventures with foreign firms (Nee, 1992). Prior to the market reform in the late 1970s, “private firms were virtually non-existent in the Chinese economy”, while the Chinese economy during that period was mainly composed by SOEs and COEs (Nee, 1992, p. 7). After the market reform of China, the private sector played a more important role in the economy. While the number of employees in urban SOEs slightly dropped from 64 million in 2009 to 55 million in 2019, over the same period, the number of employees in urban POEs grew from 55 million to 146 million (Textor, 2020). Correspondingly, the number of POEs increased drastically from 17% in 1996 to nearly 80% in 2017 (Xinhua Net, 2019). In general, POEs outperform SOEs in terms of economic performance. For example, SOEs' return on assets

³ The first version in 1993 contained 230 articles.

was estimated at 2.8%, being substantially lower than the 10.6% by POEs (Bloomberg, 2016). As a result, a mixed-ownership reform was implemented in 2013 to improve the economic performance of SOEs, which allows non-state shareholders to invest in SOEs through private capital investment, employee shareholding schemes, and initial public offerings (J. Wang & Tan, 2020). Nearly 70% of central SOEs have converted to mixed-ownership enterprises (MOEs) in 2019 (J. Li, 2019). In short, the economic landscape of China has recently diversified in terms of its ownership.

Recent economic developments place a considerable amount of pressure on Chinese senior executives to maintain corporate performance levels. For senior executives in POEs, there is greater pressure to obtain institutional resources. Research reveals that POEs face the challenge of asymmetrical treatment, such as high taxes and fees and obstacles to financing from state banks (Kung & Ma, 2018; D. Zhang & Freestone, 2013). Conversion to a market economy with fair treatment for all economic entities has been protracted because of entrenched vested interest groups (J. Wang, 2014). J. Zhang et al. (2017) argue that the government is worried about losing control of strategic resources that are crucial for political stability. Consequently, the asymmetrical distribution of institutional resources means more difficulties for POE senior executives to maintain corporate performance. Research finds that POEs are more likely to engage in illegal practices to survive in competitive markets than SOEs (Gao & Yang, 2019).

Regarding SOE senior executives, although they appear to enjoy the privilege of obtaining institutional resources due to the formal connection between the state and SOEs, they face human resource constraints that may handicap corporate economic performance. Research finds that human resource management (HRM) practices in SOEs are primarily determined and influenced by the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council (SASAC), so SOEs have a low level of autonomy in terms of appointing key managerial posts, salary structure, and incentives (W. Li et al., 2017). Therefore, HRM practices in SOEs usually do not adequately respond to the labour market, and this can create challenges for SOE senior executives to hire desirable job candidates, to motivate existing employees, and to retain talented employees (Warner et al., 2004). Empirical research consistently shows weak performance of HRM in SOEs. For example, D. Liu et al. (2017) found that employee creativity does not contribute to firm innovation effectively in SOEs as compared to POEs. Likewise, Y. C. Ng and Wei

(2012) research indicated that strategic HRM has no positive impact on enterprise efficiency within SOEs. The poor utilisation of human resources in SOEs may attribute to competency and attitude issues of employees. For example, F. Gu and Nolan (2017) found that instead of being merit-based, relationship-based recruitment and performance appraisals are still prevalent in state-owned banks in China. Human resource issues appear to place additional pressures on SOE senior executives, because of the increased pressure of reforms aiming to improve operational efficiency and economic performance. Research showed that since SASAC announced “Interim Provisions on Business Performance Evaluations for Person-in-Charge at Central Enterprises” in 2003, SOEs have put more weight on economic performance in the performance appraisal of senior executives, although political performance continues to be an important dimension (F. Liu & Zhang, 2018).

Turning to senior executives in MOEs, research shows that MOEs face the challenge of integrating different interests and practices while under pressure to improve corporate performance. Tong (2018) argues that the Chinese government tends to allow poorly performing SOEs to be invested in by private investors. Research shows that the profitability of MOEs did not increase over three years after the conversion of ownership from SOEs (G. S. Liu et al., 2015). In order to change the economic performance, MOE senior executives need to improve the organisational synergy. However, the dissonance of interests and voices between state and private shareholders is stressful. J. Wang and Tan (2020) contend that MOEs operate under a partnership-based control sharing model of corporate governance, meaning that the CCP representatives can share the authority of management with private investors. Tong (2018) also argues that power struggles between state and private shareholders may be a prominent issue in MOEs. The power struggle of shareholders can create conflicting expectations for senior executives. Furthermore, there are other integration issues at the operational level, such as different information systems, codes of conduct, HRM practices, and organisational cultures between the state and private sectors (Bei, 2014). For example, a study by Z. Chen et al. (2019) showed that long-serving employees in Chinese ports exhibited a negative attitude towards the mixed-ownership reform due to their fear of job insecurity. In short, MOE senior executives seem to face the stress of managing different internal interests and practices in order to improve corporate performance.

In summary, this section has shown that the Chinese political, legal, and economic environments have significantly changed in recent years. Rising political demands for party-building activities on senior management disrupt normal business hours and create tensions between business and political interests, particularly for SOEs. Moreover, the fast-changing legal environment has created a sense of uncertainty, increasing the workload of senior executives as they manage these dynamic environments. Furthermore, changes in organisational ownership and recent marketisation place additional performance expectations on senior executives as they now need to respond to market forces. For POE senior executives, there are challenges from the asymmetrical distribution of institutional resources; SOE senior executives are more likely to be constrained by problematic HRM practices for improving corporate economic performance; while MOE senior executives face tensions between managing the needs of the state and the private sector. In sum, the institutional context of China represents the case of a transitional economy where the market and the government do not always interact productively.

2.3 Cultural context of work stress

Although Chinese society has been influenced by Western cultures, traditional Chinese values and beliefs prevail in contemporary Chinese organisations as cultural change takes a gradual pace across many generations (L. Chen, 2017; Lockett, 1988). As cultural context can influence an individual's appraisal of what is stressful and can predispose the person to react in a culturally appropriate way (P. T. P. Wong, 1993), it has significant implications for Chinese senior executives' work stress. For example, the importance of social harmony appears to make Chinese employees particularly averse to direct conflict (C. Liu et al., 2007) and to discourage them from direct confrontation (L.-L. Huang, 2016). Scholars assert that the work stress literature has been dominated by an individualistic perspective emphasising personal control and direct action (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Kuo, 2011). A more culturally sensitive paradigm is needed to ascertain the cause of stress and how people address it (Kirkegaard & Brinkmann, 2015). Confucianism is an indigenous cultural heritage deeply instilled in Chinese societies over two thousand years (L. Chen, 2017). Despite the fact that other cultural traditions, such as Buddhism and Taoism also play a salient role in contemporary Chinese societies (C. Lin, 2010a), Confucianism is more commonly cited in the literature as the cornerstone of the Chinese

cultural system influencing organisational behaviours (e.g. Jia et al., 2012; Warner, 2010; C. Yao et al., 2020). For these reasons, the following discussion is organised by four key Confucian values, including harmony, guanxi, respect for hierarchy, and familism that have featured often in prior research (e.g. Warner, 2010; A. L. Y. Wong et al., 2010; C. Yao et al., 2020).

2.3.1 Harmony as an important goal

Harmony is the ultimate goal in Confucian philosophy (C. Li, 2014). The concept of harmony in Chinese culture does not mean agreement, conformity, and uniformity but instead it emphasises balance and reconciliation of differences and conflicts (J. Yu, 2016). Ni (2017, p. 83) elaborates on Confucian harmony in this way: “In the other words, difference is a prerequisite for harmony. The different parts of a harmonious whole interact with each other, blend in with each other, and enhance each other without sacrificing their uniqueness”.

Harmony appears to be an important determinant of the well-being of Chinese people. Research shows that the concepts of harmony and happiness are highly congruent in Chinese society (Po-Keung, 2014). In Po-Keung’s study, for example, respecting multiple values as an indicator of harmony is related to the construction of positive interpersonal relations, and is an indicator of happiness. Confucius advocates “harmony in diversity” and opposes the concept “same but in discord”, which implies that Confucian harmony allows impurities but seeks coordination and peaceful co-existence (Qi, 2018).

Several scholars have consistently employed a dualistic approach to explicate the motive of harmony, such as superficial harmony versus genuine harmony (L.-L. Huang, 2016), an instrumental perspective on harmony versus a value perspective on harmony (K. Leung et al., 2002), and disintegration avoidance versus harmony enhancement (K. Leung, 1997). On the one hand, superficial harmony (L.-L. Huang, 2016), the instrumental perspective of harmony (K. Leung et al., 2002), and disintegration avoidance (K. Leung, 1997) share a commonality in emphasising the negative consequence of a strained relationship. As a result, when people with this mindset anticipate or actually encounter interpersonal conflicts, they tend to prevaricate, disregard, or distance themselves from the conflicts (K. Leung et al., 2011). On the other hand, genuine harmony (L.-L. Huang, 2016), value perspective of harmony (K. Leung et al., 2002), and harmony enhancement (K. Leung,

1997) are similar on the grounds that others are viewed in a positive light and the person acts sincerely and actively to maintain and strengthen a positive interpersonal relationship.

The importance of harmony is not unique to China, but research indicates that Chinese people put more weight on harmony than do Western people. For example, K. Leung et al. (2011) showed that Chinese employees scored higher in both disintegration avoidance and harmony enhancement than do Australian counterparts. They also found that disintegration avoidance is positively related to compromising (i.e. making concessions to reach a mutually acceptable agreement) and obligating (i.e. loss for oneself but meeting the disputant's need) amongst Chinese employees but not amongst Australian employees. Likewise, C. Liu et al. (2018) discovered two opposite directions of influence related to the personal value of harmony on the relationship between interpersonal injustice and co-worker conflict amongst Chinese and American employees. For Chinese employees, the personal value of harmony buffered the positive relationship between interpersonal injustice and co-worker conflict, whereas it intensified this relationship in the American sample. The different effects of harmony may be able to be attributed to the fact that Chinese and American people may construe harmony differently. Eastern cultures tend to cherish relational stability and group cohesiveness, while Western cultures highly value justice and fairness (Oyserman et al., 2002). Therefore, when an interpersonal injustice is perceived, Chinese people may exhibit more behavioural inhibition while Western people are more likely to confront the problem.

The role harmony plays in conflict resolution in management and organisation studies has attracted some scholarly attention, albeit being very limited in terms of the quantity of publications (C. C. Chen et al., 2016), but maintaining harmony in itself has not yet been considered as a pressure. Maintaining harmony in the Chinese workplace nowadays seems to be very challenging given the context of economic transition where workplace competition has become fierce and open. For senior executives, certain managerial tasks can cause interpersonal disharmony. For example, reviewing subordinates' job performance and determining a bonus or punishment can elicit grievance or interpersonal strain (Cartwright & Cooper, 1997). The pressure of maintaining harmony might be particularly resonant for senior executives in SOEs as group solidarity, interpersonal harmony, and mutual sharing are more pronounced in this environment due to the socialistic ideology (X. Chen, 2018; Michael & János, 1985). In a qualitative study of the

reform of performance appraisal in state banks, Gu and Nolan's (2017) research participants revealed that they had a level of high concern of losing *mianzi* (or face) due to poor appraisal outcomes (F. Gu & Nolan, 2017).

In short, maintaining harmony is a culturally desired goal in China, whereas senior executives whose responsibilities involve a large portion of managing people, such as performance review and dispute resolution, are likely to face the challenge of maintaining harmony while conducting their managerial tasks.

2.3.2 Guanxi as a complex relationship at work and beyond

Guanxi can be defined as a relationship of trust without the need for third parties' enforcement (Burt & Burzynska, 2017) that usually entails asymmetrical exchange of favours between persons (Barbalet, 2018) over the long-term (Yum, 1988). Guanxi requires an obligation of maintaining harmony and mutual benefits of in-groups by exchanging favours (Q. Hu et al., 2016a). It is therefore an important social currency for business-related activities in China (Westwood & Lok, 2003).

Although guanxi is a very important concept in Chinese management, surprisingly it is rarely studied within the context of work stress. In the organisational context, the moral legitimacy of guanxi is often challenged by scholars as the obligation of exchanging favours encouraged by guanxi can lead to unethical behaviours, such as favouritism, bribery, and corruption at the workplace (J. Li & Madsen, 2011). In 2014, more than 100 top executives from some large Chinese SOEs, such as Petro China, Sinopec, and China Southern Airlines were detained on the suspicion of corruption (Anderlini, 2015). Under the currently upheld political movement of anticorruption, cultivating and maintaining favour with superiors in the office or government officials through unethical guanxi exchanges have an increased risk of breaking the law. Besides, guanxi exchange does not always stand on an equal ground, which may cause a loss of resources. For example, Q. Hu et al. (2016a) found that guanxi can lead to job burnout because building guanxi requires much investment of emotion and energy, whereas returns from guanxi are often uncertain. Other research has also shown that employees who suffer from guanxi violation with their superiors are prone to experiencing more work-family conflict (Zhu & Li, 2016). These prior studies suggest that cultivating and maintaining guanxi and loss of guanxi should be considered work pressures.

Although *guanxi* is a potential pressure for Chinese senior executives, it appears to be instrumental for managing job demands and careers because *guanxi* can amplify one's ability to acquire resources (Bian, 2017). Firstly, empirical research indicates that *guanxi* with superiors is positively related to both social and task resources at work (Q. Hu et al., 2016a). Secondly, a considerable amount of research has shown that social *guanxi* outside of the workplace, such as political and business *guanxi*, can help managers keep abreast of information and secure bank loans (Gibb & Zhang, 2017; H. Wang et al., 2011). H. Wang et al. (2011) observed that POEs strategically recruit former government officials into their top management teams, since their personal connections with government officials can reduce risk of environmental uncertainty and enhance a firm's ability of obtaining institutional resources. Lastly, regarding the stress of career development, people who possess a powerful *guanxi* network have strong bargaining power in recruitment, better job security, and a higher opportunity of promotion (Gibb & Zhang, 2017; Ko & Liu, 2017; S. Zhang & Bright, 2012). In an overall picture, it would seem that Chinese senior executives with more social *guanxi* are in a better position to overcome daily job demands and reduce the concern of career development.

In short, *guanxi* appears to be a double-edged sword being a pressure as well as a resource in the Chinese work environment. *Guanxi* can be a pressure because cultivating and maintaining *guanxi* entails substantial investment of resources but without a guarantee of return, and at the same time, unethical *guanxi* exchanges could easily become the target of anticorruption. As for being a resource, it can help Chinese senior executives obtain resources from inside and outside of their organisations for tackling daily work issues and safeguarding career stability and advancement.

2.3.3 Respect for hierarchy as a rule of workplace interactions

Respect for hierarchy is rooted in the Confucian teachings of *wu lun* that emphasises five primary unequal social relationships in traditional Chinese society: master-follower, father-son, elder-younger brother, husband-wife, and senior friend-junior friend (Hofstede, 2001). In the literature, the construct of traditionality, is used to denote respect for hierarchy as it is measured by the degree of submission to authority (e.g. Farh et al., 2007; Z. Yao et al., 2019). Traditional employees show more acceptance of power difference and seldom question decisions made by their superiors (W. Li et al., 2017).

However, respect for hierarchy can take a toll on a subordinate's well-being because a psychological contract that is built on an unequal social relationship can be fragile in an increasingly turbulent and competitive Chinese workplace. Research shows that job insecurity has a bigger impact on Chinese employees than American employees (Probst & Lawler, 2006). A psychological contract in the Chinese workplace is likely to be forged by an employee expectation of stable, long-term employment in exchange for devoting trust and loyalty to their employers (Kwon et al., 2018). In the case of the employer failing to provide job security, the well-being of traditional Chinese employees is very likely to decrease (H.-J. Wang et al., 2014). This is because traditional Chinese employees have a strong affective commitment to their employers (H. Li & Ngo, 2017). As such, job insecurity may approximate a violation of trust and a loss of the meaning of loyalty. Although China is considered a hierarchical society that is outwardly coloured by unequal social exchanges, mutual and complementary obligations are crucial for maintaining social order and interpersonal relationships (Hofstede, 2001). This implies that by following the rules of obedience and respect for superiors at the workplace, subordinates also expect superiors' protection, such as long-term employment and satisfactory working conditions. However, under the current institutional environment of China with frequent reforms, leadership rotation, and fierce market competition, employers may not be able to provide sufficient job security to senior executives. As a result, a psychological contract breach within a hierarchical workplace can be particularly distressing.

Nonetheless, respect for hierarchy may emancipate Chinese senior executives from direct challenges from subordinates because the noticeable power distance can inhibit provocative behaviours and direct confrontation from the upward direction (Brew & David, 2004). Furthermore, the culture of respect for hierarchy may provide Chinese senior executives with more informal authority to enforce compliance of decisions made or even disregard different opinions from subordinates (K. Leung & Chan, 1999). Although the effectiveness of an authoritarian leadership style is debatable, respect for hierarchy may enhance the efficiency of coordinating and delegating subordinates to accomplish work goals.

In short, respect for hierarchy contains an expectation of employer's protection and consideration but a transitional economy that increasingly values competition and constantly instigates reforms can make this traditional social relationship problematic in

the workplace. Nevertheless, Chinese senior executives holding a more salient power distance from their subordinates may have less trouble dealing with divergent opinions and more power to deploy subordinates to achieve their work goals.

2.3.4 Familism as a burden and a source of support

Family is a core cultural value for Chinese people (J. Liu et al., 2012; C. Yao et al., 2020). Lau (1984) argues that Chinese familism is a kind of utilitarian familism, meaning that career success is a means to the end of securing family welfare. Westwood and Lok (2003) also point out that Chinese societies have a high work centrality because sustaining the wealth and face of family are an essential moral obligation for Chinese people. However, in recent decades Chinese people have encountered rising family economic pressure (S. Xin et al., 2020). For example, according to NBSPRC (2019), the average unit price (RMB/per square meter) of residential properties in China was five times higher in 2018 as compared to that in 1998. Although the average household disposable income (AHDI) also increased at the same time, the affordability of purchasing residential properties has become a large concern in China. In Beijing, for instance, despite the fact that AHDI increased at an average rate of 10.54% annually from 2004 to 2010, over the same period, the property price continuously rose at an average rate of 23.8% annually (Z. Yang, 2014). For the sake of family wealth and stability, Chinese employees work very hard to keep up with the soaring living costs. A survey by WUST (2018) indicated that Chinese people work 47.56 hours per week, far exceeding the 40 hours/week standard set up by the government. It is also noted that the 996 working pattern becomes common in some industries (e.g. internet and information technologies), where people work from 9 am to 9 pm, on a roll of 6 days, resulting in an astonishing total of 72 working hours per week (Pak, 2019). The fact that Chinese people generally work very long hours does not invalidate the claim that family is very important to Chinese people, because career success is critical for ensuring the collective well-being of family (C. Yao et al., 2020), at least from a materialistic perspective.

Moreover, work-family conflict is a serious issue contributing to work stress (Cooper et al., 2001; Kalliath & Kalliath, 2014). A meta-analysis of work-family conflict studies shows that the level of work-family conflict in China increased from 2005 to 2016, but interestingly, this increase is mainly caused by the increase of family interference in work rather than work interfering with family (S. Xin et al., 2020). In a similar vein, Choi's

research (2008) mirrors the claim of a stronger impact of family demands on work-family conflict. S. Xin et al. (2020) argue that social changes in China are responsible for increased family demands, such as higher elderly dependence and divorce rates in the midst of fierce workplace competition. Since the implementation of the “One Child” policy in China, family sizes have become smaller, meaning that the responsibility of taking care of elderly parents usually lands on the shoulders of the single child rather than sharing by siblings. Additionally, providing care and financial support to elderly parents in China is no longer merely a social obligation but it is legally enforced by the “Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly” (C. Yao et al., 2020). Also, the divorce rate in China rose from 0.44 in 1985 to 3.02 in 2016 (National Bureau of Statistics of the People’s Republic of China [NBSPRC], 2019), which suggests a surge of unstable spousal relationships and domestic issues in Chinese families. These social changes together explain why work-family conflict is a prominent issue for contemporary Chinese people.

However, family not only creates demands but also provides support and resources (Dewe & Cooper, 2017). Previous studies of cross-cultural comparison indicate that Asian populations have a stronger connection with family members than European counterparts (Lay et al., 1998; H. Z. Li, 2002). Correspondingly, Jin et al. (2013) found that Chinese employees receive more emotional and instrumental support from family than do the American counterparts. While the concept of family is usually confined to nuclear family in Western societies, Asian families have a wider scope including parents and siblings. Such an extended interconnectedness of family members can amplify the ability to obtain social support (Chun et al., 2006; Kuo, 2013). For example, it is not uncommon to see that older siblings provide child caretaking for younger siblings in more traditional families (Cicirelli, 1994). Tariq and Ding (2018) also discovered that family can compensate for the absence of intrinsic work motivation (i.e. meaning and enjoyment of work) amongst Chinese employees who suffer from abusive supervision. Taken together, family can help reduce work stress.

In short, family values are central to Chinese culture and its people, where there has been an intensification of work-family conflict in recent years due to the rapid social changes. Although familial obligations have contributed to a considerable amount of stress due to the importance of career success for safeguarding the materialistic wealth of family,

family is an important basis where Chinese people can seek emotional support and physical help to mitigate work stress.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed Chinese institutional and cultural contexts. The review of institutional context indicates a dynamic interplay between the market and the government, resulting in intensified political demands of party-building, turbulent regulatory environment, and challenges of maintaining corporate performance. The review also examines four key Confucian values, including harmony, guanxi, respect for hierarchy, and familism, and their influences on work stress. As shown in the discussion, these four cultural values assume a paradoxical role in the experience of work stress, that is, they can contribute to and reduce stress. In a general picture, the Chinese transitional economy with a strong adherence to traditional cultural values and special institutional contexts plays a critical role in shaping the experience of Chinese work stress. The next chapter explains the theoretical framework and research questions of this study.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

As the previous chapter has shown, institutional changes and traditional values create significant pressures on organisations and their managers. This chapter reviews the conceptualisations of work stress and key theoretical debates. It consists of three main sections. The first section elaborates on the concept of work stress and the theoretical framework adopted for this study. As cognitive appraisal theory postulates that the level of stress is determined by both stressors and the utilisation of coping resources (Dewe et al., 2013; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the remaining two sections focus on these two key aspects and generate the research questions guiding the study.

3.2 Work stress

Early studies of stress usually adopt either a response approach or a stimulus approach (Aldwin, 2007; Cooper et al., 2001). Selye (1956) claims that stress is a nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it. From this perspective, stress is associated with physiological, psychological, and behavioural responses, regardless of the cause. In contrast, the stimulus approach views stress as an independent variable that produces a range of responses (Cooper et al., 2001). These two approaches can be commonly seen in the literature. For example, some situational stimuli, such as role overload, role ambiguity, role conflict, insufficient job control, interpersonal conflict, and job security, are often a proxy for work stress (e.g. M.-J. Chen & Cunradi, 2008; Kuchinke et al., 2010; Ryu et al., 2020). In a similar vein, certain psychological and physical strains, including anxiety, depression, exhaustion, high blood pressure, sleep disturbance, job dissatisfaction, disengagement, absenteeism, and turnover intention, are measured to indicate the level of stress (Ivancevich et al., 1982; Lornudd et al., 2016; Orpen, 1984; Skakon et al., 2011). A shortcoming shared by these two approaches is that they ignore the relative nature of the experience of stress (Cooper et al., 2001; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The stimulus approach holds a view that every demand can engender unpleasant experiences without considering individual differences and contexts (Cooper et al., 2001; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Likewise, it is too strong a claim to say that, according to the response approach, if one is having strain, he or she is troubled by stress (Cooper et al., 2001; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Increasingly, researchers tend to consider stress to be

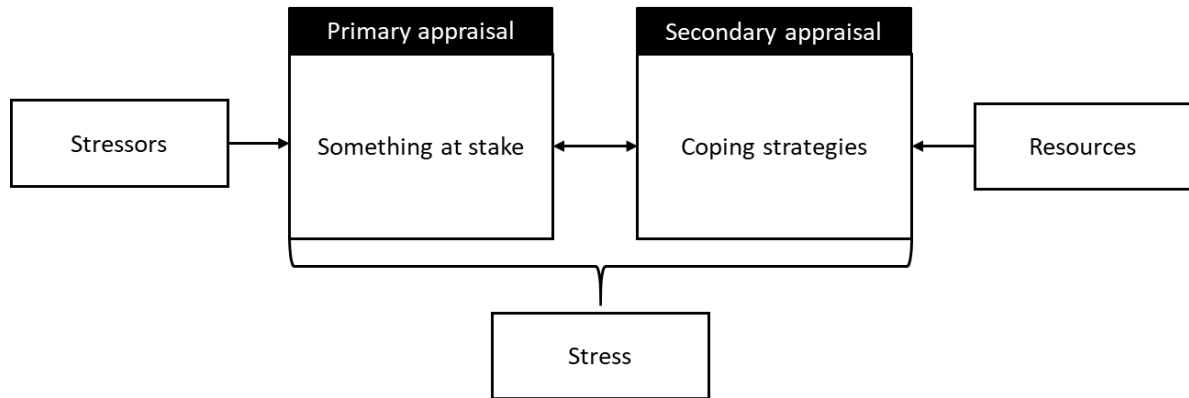
a subjective experience resulting from the transaction between the person and the environment (Dewe & Cooper, 2017).

The transactional approach defines stress as “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). This theoretical approach emphasises the relationship between the person and the environment rather than stimuli or responses. Many prevalent work stress theories reflect the transactional view of stress. For example, person-environment (P-E) fit theory suggests that stress derives from a misfit between the person (i.e. abilities and needs) and the environment (i.e. demands and supplies) (Edwards et al., 1998; French et al., 1982). Furthermore, job demand-control theory views work stress as a result of an imbalance between psychological demands and decision latitude in the work environment (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). These theoretical approaches invariably emphasise the relationship between the person and the environment rather than either an environmental stimulus or a response from the person.

Cognitive appraisal theory is the cornerstone of the transactional approach to define stress and it incorporates the concept of coping in influencing the experience of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The model of cognitive appraisal theory consists of primary and secondary appraisals (illustrated by Figure 3.1). Primary appraisal is an evaluative process of situational antecedents or stressors, the function of which is to inform whether the environment involves a harm/loss, threat, or challenge. The harm or loss refers to a current state in which something valuable to the person has been damaged or affected; the threat is about the anticipation of such harm or loss; the challenge has a positive connotation as it is associated with potential gain or growth inherent in the stressful encounter. Secondary appraisal centres on an evaluation of the availability of coping options, the likelihood of implementing a particular coping strategy or a set of coping strategies, and the effectiveness of coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Based on cognitive appraisal theory, stress is conceptualised as a transactional process between the person and the environment, which is encapsulated by the primary and the secondary appraisal. These two appraisals are interdependent and they have a reciprocal relationship (Lazarus, 1999). If coping resources are perceived to be abundantly available and adequate for addressing the situational antecedents of primary appraisal, the feeling of

stress will decrease. In contrast, if coping is perceived as blocked or ineffective, the magnitude of stress will intensify. Thus, the level of stress is determined by both the primary and the secondary appraisal.

Figure 3.1: Cognitive appraisal theory



Source: Based on the work of Lazarus & Folkman (1984)

Although cognitive appraisal theory was not devised specifically for the workplace context, given its comprehensive explanatory power, it has been widely employed in work stress research (e.g. Gomes et al., 2016; Hewett et al., 2018; Simões et al., 2019). In light of cognitive appraisal theory, work stress occurs when there is a workplace situation that is perceived to endanger well-being, but where there are insufficient resources to cope with that situation (Dewe et al., 2013; Gomes et al., 2016). As shown by the Figure 3.1, the experience of stress is not exclusively determined by situational antecedents or stressors, but also influenced by the utilisation of coping resources, enacted by coping strategies. Thus, section 3.3 and section 3.4 below elaborate on stressors and coping, together constituting the overall experience of stress.

3.3 Work stressors

3.3.1 Defining work stressors

In simple terms, work stressors refer to workplace situational antecedents that arouse the appraisal of loss, threat, or challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). That said, there is some inconsistency of terminology in describing the antecedents of the primary appraisal since demand and stressor are used interchangeably in research usually without a clear explanation of their conceptual differences (e.g. Xie et al., 2008). According to cognitive appraisal theory, not every situational antecedent is appraised as “something at stake”. A

situational antecedent is possibly appraised as “irrelevant”, when the situation causes no harm to the person (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). A demand does not necessarily lead to stress but a stressor has greater potential. For example, a job task as a demand conducted repeatedly every day may not trigger stress as it has no novelty and challenge. The employee probably has developed good skills and sufficient experience and/or the organisation may have established effective procedures and resources for handling the task. In comparison, the concept of stressor is more resonant with stress since those situations being considered as stressors, such as role conflict, role overload, and role ambiguity, can have severe impacts on well-being (Kath et al., 2013; Van Bogaert et al., 2014). In addition, a stressor often involves two different demands competing at the same time, whereas a demand tends to be unidimensional. For example, family obligation is a demand, whereas work-family conflict comprising both work and family demands is a stressor. In this example, demand is only an element of the stressor but not vice versa. Given these characteristics, stressor is a more adequate concept used to capture the situational antecedents triggering the primary appraisal of stress. Demerouti et al. (2001, p. 501) share this view by saying that “we prefer to use the term stressor only when an external factor has the potential to exert a negative influence on most people in most situations”. However, it is important to note that labelling something as a stressor does not mean that everyone will experience stress if the stressor is present. After all, stress is a subjective experience depending on both the primary and secondary appraisals. This research chooses stressor rather demand on the ground that a stressor signifies a potential link with the primary appraisal – “something at stake”.

An important note here is that the experience of stress does not necessarily connote negative meanings but its impairing effect on well-being is evident in empirical research. Whether stress is viewed positively or negatively is open to individual interpretations of situations. For example, a difficult job task could be appraised as a challenge stressor with potential gains such as growth of competency. However, the appraisal of stressors is complex, and the meanings derived from the appraisal can be compound, meaning that the same stressor can carry both positive and negative meanings. A difficult task can be perceived as a challenge (positive) at its initial assignment, but along with excessive demands for accomplishing it, the situation can be considered a threat to health (negative). Some researchers have tried to distinguish “hindrance” stressors (e.g. workload, time

pressure, and responsibility) from “challenge” stressors (e.g. political barriers, role ambiguity, and role conflict) at the workplace, and contend that challenge stressors tend to produce positive outcomes while hindrance stressors tend to produce negative outcomes (Cavanaugh et al., 2000). For instance, in a study of U.S. managers, challenge stressors were positively related to job satisfaction and negatively related to job searches (an indicator of turnover), while hindrance stressors had the opposite, unfavorable outcomes (Cavanaugh et al., 2000). However, a meta-analysis of 32 studies indicated the weak theoretical foundation of this study by showing that both hindrance and challenge stressors can impair individual well-being (Mazzola & Disselhorst, 2019). An important reason is that the appraisal of work stressors is very dynamic, thus it is unlikely to be unidimensional in terms of appraised meanings. Instead, it is more likely that positive and negative meanings are intertwined in people’s appraisal. It is in line with other research that posit that stressors can be appraised as hindrance or challenge, or both at the same time (P. Li et al., 2020; Webster et al., 2011). Webster et al. (2011) found that although stressors appraised as challenges were found to have no significant correlation with psychological strain, they contributed to physical strain. Webster et al. (2011) argue that individuals who enjoy job challenges may not suffer from psychological strain immediately, but prolonged exposure to job challenges will reduce their overall well-being in the long term. This view is consistent with that of Mazzola and Disselhorst (2019) in that some work stressors may contain positive meanings but the process of overcoming the stressors requires energy and resources, which eventually leads to some sort of negative impacts on well-being.

Additionally, the literature of psychosocial risk factors contributes to the scholarly discussion of work stressors (e.g. Cox et al., 2000; Q. Hu et al., 2016b; International Labour Office, 1986). For example, according to Eurofound and EU-OSHA (2014), psychosocial risk factors are categorised into job content, work intensity and job autonomy, working time-schedules and work-life balance, social environment, and job insecurity and career development. To a large extent, these perceived work conditions resemble work stressors that will be discussed in the following section. Although psychosocial risk factors can contribute to stress, research under this heading tends to focus on some general health and well-being outcomes, such as burnout, musculoskeletal disorders, and sleeping problems (Dollard et al., 2007; Eurofound and EU-OSHA, 2014).

The complex relationships amongst work conditions, stress, and well-being outcomes remain as an important domain of research. Yet, as this research intends to explore antecedents causing stress rather than health and well-being outcomes, it adopts the term stressor instead of psychosocial risk factor.

3.3.2 Classification of work stressors

Work stressors are usually classified into six categories, including intrinsic job characteristics, role in the organisation, interpersonal issues, career development, organisational factors, and home-work interface (Cartwright & Cooper, 1997; Cooper, Cooper, et al., 1988; Cooper et al., 2001). The following subsections review each category briefly.

3.3.2.1 *Intrinsic job characteristics*

Intrinsic job characteristics can include physical demands and work-scheduling factors that characterise the job. Physical demands comprise noise, temperature, vibration, exposure to risk and hazards, and workload, while working scheduling factors contain shift work, long hours, travel, to name a few (Cartwright & Cooper, 1997; Cooper et al., 2001). For example, in a study of Hong Kong construction workers, poor on-site working environment (i.e. high temperature, noise, polluted air, and hazards) were a significant predictor of emotional distress, which could lead to injury incidents at work (M.-Y. Leung et al., 2010). Additionally, a considerable number of empirical studies have shown a positive link between workload and stress (e.g. Schiff & Leip, 2019; Suarathana & Riana, 2016). The mechanism of producing stress through workload is usually explained by the dimensions of quantitative workload and qualitative workload (Cartwright & Cooper, 1997). While quantitative workload is characterised by too many tasks and too little time, qualitative workload involves the complexity and difficulty of accomplishing a task beyond the person's capability (Schiff & Leip, 2019). With regard to work-scheduling factors, shift work could disrupt an individual's circadian rhythm, and it was found to be associated with sleep problems and the pressure of fulfilling tasks that had a high responsibility for other people amongst Swiss police officers (Gerber et al., 2010).

3.3.2.2 *Role in the organisation*

Role in the organisation as a major category of stressors includes role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload, and responsibility. First, role ambiguity is defined as a “a direct

function of the discrepancy between the information available to the person and that which is required for adequate performance of his role” (Kahn et al., 1964, p. 73). Subsequent research by Jones-Carmack (2019) examined role ambiguity by looking into three aspects of lacking information, including lack of clarity about work goal, method to achieve the work goal, and the consequence of one’s action for achieving the work goal.

Secondly, role conflict is concerned with the incompatibility of role expectations in general, but it can be divided into four different types, including intra-sender conflict, inter-sender conflict, inter-role conflict, and person-role conflict (Kahn et al., 1964). Intra-sender conflict refers to incongruent demands sent by the same role sender. For example, a superior requires a task to be done within a short timeframe with full compliance to regulations, whereas in order to comply with the regulations, the project timeline should be more elastic. Inter-sender conflict occurs when two role senders within the workplace demand conflicting requests. Inter-role conflict means that the focal person has two different roles associated with different domains which require incompatible demands to be met. For example, the boss requires overtime but the wife needs more company. These three types of role conflict result from objective environmental demands that are incompatible, whereas the fourth type of role conflict is derived from a combination of the pressure from environmental demands and internal forces. The internal force, such as the person’s values and needs, can clash with role requirements. For example, unethical conduct commanded by superiors can contradict an individual’s personal work ethics.

The third stressor related to roles in the organisation is role overload, which is concerned with too many roles a person has to perform in an organisation (Kahn et al., 1964). Role overload may or may not relate to job ambiguity and conflict but its core impact on work stress is the uncertainty of job performance due to the excessive demands of many organisational roles (Cooper et al., 2001).

The last stressor associated with roles in organisation is responsibility, including responsibility for things (e.g. equipment and budgets) and responsibility for people (Cartwright & Cooper, 1997; Cooper et al., 2001). For instance, worrying about the safety of self and others is a salient stressor for off-shore oil installation workers because an operational mistake can easily cause injury or death (W.-Q. Chen et al., 2003).

3.3.2.3 Interpersonal issues

Interpersonal issues at the workplace as a category of stressor mainly focus on conflicts. Ilies et al. (2011) explain that interpersonal conflict at work can derive from contentious disagreement over handling a certain task or from rude behaviours. Some authors tend to investigate different workplace relationships, such as those with supervisors and co-workers (De Raeye et al., 2009; Frone, 2000; Ilies et al., 2011) and those with mentees (Yi et al., 2017). For instance, Frone (2000) found that conflict with supervisors was associated with organisation-related strains (i.e. lower job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and turnover intention), whereas conflict with co-workers was related to person-related strains (i.e. depression, loss of self-esteem, and somatic symptoms). Interestingly, there is less research on interpersonal conflict with subordinates, but Cartwright and Cooper (1997) contend that managers who are promoted from technical and scientific backgrounds are prone to lack attention and skills for managing personal relationships with subordinates.

Rather than looking into different work relationships, other authors are interested in some problematic interpersonal interactions, such as abrasive behaviours and authoritarian leadership (Cooper et al., 2001). For instance, Briker et al. (2021) discovered that the personality aspect of time urgency was associated with autocratic leadership, which in turn increased the work stress of subordinates. In particular, some extreme forms of interpersonal conflict, including workplace bullying, harassment, and violence, are salient work stressors (Dollard et al., 2007; Hauge et al., 2010). For example, workplace bullying is positively related to some common psychological and behavioural outcomes of work stress, including depression, anxiety, job turnover, and absenteeism (Hauge et al., 2010). In short, interpersonal issues are an important work stressor primarily concerning the negative side of human interactions in the workplace.

3.3.2.4 Career development

The category of stressors related to career development is usually concerned with promotion issues, job insecurity, career achievement discrepancy, and perceived mismatch of career. In the respect of promotion, procedural injustice and lower promotion rates were found to be associated with poor health of female managers in Taiwanese hospitals (D.-R. Chen et al., 2008). Along with flattening organisations and increasing competition, the reduced prospect of hierarchical advancement is a common stressor for

employees (Ito & Brotheridge, 2009). Personal factors, such as promotion aspiration and employment dependence (i.e. depending on the organisation for employment), can also exacerbate the stress of a career plateau (Ito & Brotheridge, 2009). Interestingly, promotion can be a stressor. For example, in a study by Johnston and Lee (2013), although promotions improved perceived job security and job satisfaction in the short term, mental health deteriorated within two years after a promotion, probably because of increased responsibility, accountability, and work hours. It might be particularly true for the situation of overpromotion, where the new role requirements are beyond the capabilities of the person (Cooper et al., 2001).

Job insecurity is also often considered as a work stressor. The perceived probability of loss of job continuity or valued job features, coupled with a sense of powerlessness to influence the situation (Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 2010) is a stressor. Job security is a central individual need, while job insecurity is associated with many unfavourable psychological states, such as ambiguity, uncertainty, and concern (Dewe & Cooper, 2017). A number of empirical studies have shown that job insecurity can reduce job satisfaction and increase psychological and physical strain (G. H. L. Cheng & Chan, 2008; De Witte, 1999). Although there are a number of ways to reduce the impact of job insecurity, such as open and honest communication and inviting employees into the change process, job insecurity is difficult to avoid especially when there is a severe economic downturn (De Witte, 2005). Dewe and Cooper (2017) contend that worry of employability, instead of job insecurity appears to be a more salient stressor nowadays because the contemporary work experience generally reflects the nature of perpetual changes in organisations, such as organisational restructuring and downsizing (Baruch & Hind, 1999). Forrier and Sels (2003) assert that “lifetime employability” instead of “lifetime employment” has emerged as a new focus in the labour market. In this case, a greater responsibility for career stability and advancement seems to have shifted from organisations to individuals (Baruch & Hind, 1999).

This shift of attention regarding career development is accompanied by an interest in career goal-performance discrepancy, which is not specifically focused on the experience of a current job but concerns the overall experience regarding the progress of one’s current career status towards a career goal (Creed & Hood, 2015; Creed et al., 2017). A career goal-performance discrepancy scale designed by Creed and Hood (2015) measured

the appraisals of four aspects, including achievement, ability, effort, and status-related discrepancies. Subsequent studies applying this scale have consistently shown that perceived career discrepancy leads to career-related negative emotions, such as frustration and depression (Creed et al., 2017; S. Hu et al., 2018a).

The last major group of career-related stressors is about the degree of fit between the job holder and the job. For example, P. Yang and Yang (2019) found that career-related stress derived from an orientation issue (the job holder perceives a poor match between personal characteristics (i.e. value and interest) and the job), and from a balance issue (the job holder is concerned about the work-life imbalance). P. Yang (2017b) adds that the mismatch between competencies and the current job is another career-related stressor for nurses.

In short, stressors relating to career development are mainly characterised by negative career-related situations, including the lack of promotion or negative consequences of promotion, job insecurity, slow career progress, and career mismatch.

3.3.2.5 Organisational factors

Organisational factors that induce work stress usually centre on two main problems: lack of participation in decision-making and organisational politics. In the case of the former, the identification of this stressor corresponds well to demand-control theory viewing work stress as a result of imbalance between psychological demands and decision latitude (Karasek, 1979). Decision latitude constituted by decision authority and skills is a critical resource for managing demands (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Empirical research has shown that lacking job autonomy (i.e. authority of making decisions at work) is positively related to emotional fatigue and worry (M.-Y. Leung et al., 2010; Schiff & Leip, 2019).

Organisational politics, defined as self-serving behaviour sabotaging organisational goals and other organisational members' well-being, is another stressor in organisations (Landells & Albrecht, 2019; Miller et al., 2008). Based on their qualitative study, Landells and Albrecht (2016) classify five different dimensions of organisational politics, including abuses of relationships, reputation, resources, decisions, and communication channels. In a subsequent quantitative study of Australian professionals and public servants, Landells and Albrecht (2019) showed a positive relationship between organisational politics and work stress (indicated by the level of strain). In a similar vein,

investigating nurses in both private and government-owned hospitals, Labrague et al. (2017) found that political behaviours were a significant predictor of psychological and physiological strain, burnout, and turnover intention. Furthermore, based on a meta-analysis of 24 samples involving approximately 9000 participants, Miller et al. (2008) confirmed a positive link between organisational politics and work stress.

3.3.2.6 Home-work interface

Conflicts from the home-work interface that involve competing role expectations in the home and work domains is part of the inter-role conflict as already mentioned above (Cooper et al., 2001; Kahn et al., 1964). Since new communication technologies that blur the boundary between work and personal life (Hill et al., 1998) and dual-career families with more women in full-time employment (Cartwright & Cooper, 1997) are common in contemporary societies, the home-work interface has developed as a major work stressor. Cooper et al. (2001) summarise three fundamental conflicts from the home-work interface. First, time-based conflict refers to the finite time and energy for addressing demands from both the workplace and the family concurrently. Second, behaviour-based conflict is concerned with the different behavioural norms or expectations in the work and family domains. For example, a CEO may need to be assertive and decisive at work, whereas family members may expect him or her to be caring and considerate at home. Lastly, strain-based conflict describes the spill-over of negative emotions from one domain to the other, which consequently impact the functioning of the affected domain via a crossover effect. For example, Sanz - Vergel et al. (2015) reveal that family-work conflict can accentuate workplace interpersonal conflicts, which creates strains that can permeate family domains (*spill over*) and then create interpersonal conflicts with the partner (*crossover*).

Research also examines two dimensions of home-work interface in producing conflicts, that is, whether home or work contributes more to the conflict. Blom et al. (2014) confirm that both work-home conflict (WHC) and home-work conflict (HWC) are positively related to job burnout. Research in 10 European countries showed that men generally suffer more from WHC than HWC, suggesting that the traditional role expectation of man being the breadwinner in family still prevails (Fahlén, 2014). However, the research also showed that gender differences in both dimensions of the conflict is smallest in Nordic

countries, probably due to more institutional support in accommodating home/work demands and less strongly delineated and fewer traditional gender norms in these countries (Fahlén, 2014).

In summary, this section has provided an overview of research of work stressors in six major categories. The next section critically reviews work stressor research in the Chinese context.

3.3.3 Work stressors in the Chinese context

Work stress research in the Chinese context usually focuses on the potential outcomes of the six main stressors above and adds little new understanding about the nature of these stressors in the Chinese context. This is evident in the fact that prior research has mainly adopted instruments of measuring work stressors developed in the Western context in relation to some outcome variables, such as psychological and physical strain. For example, the Occupational Stress Indicator (OSI) (Cooper, Sloan, et al., 1988) and its subsequent version – OSI-2 (S. Williams & Cooper, 1996) are conspicuous in the research on Chinese work stress (e.g. C.-Q. Lu et al., 2009; L. Lu et al., 2003; Shanfa et al., 1998; Siu et al., 2002; Siu et al., 1997). The OSI was originally developed from a small sample of middle-level and senior managers working in the UK (Stephen Williams & Cooper, 1998). The OSI measures the level of six major stressors already explained in the previous section (Cooper, Sloan, et al., 1988). To improve the applicability of the OSI, S. Williams and Cooper (1996) used a larger, and more diverse sample (e.g. different job levels, industries, occupations, and ethnicities) to modify the original OSI and create the OSI-2.

Early research in Chinese work stress has been primarily interested in testing the existing stressors found in Western research, such as their relevance (level of prevalence), outcome variables (e.g. physical and psychological strains), or moderators in the stressor-strain relationship (e.g. C.-Q. Lu et al., 2005; Siu et al., 2002). For example, C.-Q. Lu et al. (2009) found that organisational factors and interpersonal issues are higher in Chinese SOEs than in the counterpart POEs. Likewise, C.-Q. Lu et al. (2005) found a positive relationship between the aggregated level of the six stressors and strains (i.e. decreased job satisfaction, more physical strain, and more psychological strain), and a moderating effect of managerial self-efficacy between the total level of all stressors and physical strain. While these studies have examined the relevance of the six major work stressors

in the Chinese context, little research has been devoted to exploring work stressors from the perspective of Chinese people. In the other words, work stress research has not yet made enough effort to locate the phenomenon in a more culturally embedded context. Articles published in highly ranked management and organisation journals, such as *Academy of Management Journal* (Barkema et al., 2015) and *International Journal of Management Review* (C. Yao et al., 2020), have called for more research taking a context-sensitive approach to advance concepts and theories by examining the Eastern context.

Whereas some studies have incorporated a cultural perspective by specifically investigating work stressors that seem to be salient in Chinese society (e.g. C. Liu et al., 2007; L. Lu et al., 2011), they rely on instruments developed in the Western literature. Although these studies make some theoretical contribution from a construct salience perspective in which case they show that a Western construct has a similar effect amongst Chinese people, they have a limited capability in achieving construct infusion that requires discovery of new dimensions or interpretations in an existing construct (Barkema et al., 2015). For example, interpersonal conflict is a well-known work stressor in the U.S. (Spector & Jex, 1998). It is considered to be a particularly salient work stressor for Chinese people because Chinese culture emphasises harmony and interdependence of in-group members (C. Liu et al., 2007; L. Lu et al., 2011). Nevertheless, C. C. Chen et al. (2016) contend that while conflict and harmony are two sides of the same coin, the literature has had a disproportional interest in researching interpersonal conflict rather than interpersonal harmony. In the other words, stress derived from workplace interpersonal issues is exclusively imbued with handling conflict rather than pursuing harmony. However, overemphasising harmony in a competitive society can protract problem-solving, undermine organisational efficiency, and even cause resentment and disappointment (K. Leung et al., 2011). Unfortunately, although there is an increasing number of organisational studies of harmony (e.g. Chin, 2015; Z.-X. Zhang & Wei, 2017), no one has attempted to examine whether maintaining harmony is a stressor in the Chinese workplace.

Barkema et al. (2015) assert that inductive research is an important approach to enrich the understanding of existing constructs. C. Yao et al. (2020) also argue that it is critical not to simply borrow Western concepts and test them in the Eastern context, but it is more meaningful to let the indigenous context inform research for theoretical development.

Some work stress researchers have taken the inductive approach to unravel the Chinese context, though this kind of research remains marginal. For example, by interviewing 21 dual-qualification nursing teachers who had both teaching and practising responsibilities, Y. Wu et al. (2013) found that personal safety is a salient, widespread work stressor for nursing professionals in China, whereas violence is usually limited to the emergency department of hospitals in the U.S. In their view, Chinese children have grown up in a doting environment under the one-child policy, which has resulted in children with a defiant, imperious character, and Chinese parents are also prone to overreact if their children are hurt unintentionally. Wu et al. (2013) show that the Chinese social environment can influence the experience of work stress.

This research does not intend to discard the value of quantitative research. The argument here is that qualitative research has the advantage of identifying some indigenous work stressors that are salient or unique in contexts. For example, D. J. Feng and Shi (2005) developed a work stressor questionnaire by interviewing nine Chinese public servants. They noted that superiors of Chinese public servants often made unrealistic decisions and lacked thorough planning for job tasks. Subsequently, by applying Feng and Shi's questionnaire, L. Zhang et al. (2019) found that the pressure from superiors was the most salient stressor for Chinese public servants in their study. This finding echoes the social context of China, where the traditional culture of respect for hierarchy and socialistic values (e.g. self-sacrifice and devotion to the public good) encourage people to follow superiors' requests without questioning (Xiao & Cooke, 2012). In their study of work-life balance in China, Xiao and Cooke (2012) also discovered that public servants suffer the greatest pressure from superiors as they are often unexpectedly called back to attend urgent meetings or deal with some tasks after office hours. Unfortunately, research into Chinese work stress adopting the inductive approach is only piecemeal. There is a lack of understanding of work stressors in the Chinese workplace.

In short, the review of empirical research on Chinese work stressors indicates a need to adopt an inductive approach to explore the stressors embedded in the Chinese work environment. Chinese research of work stressors tends to employ Western instruments to test stressor-strain relationships rather than investigating work stressors from a Chinese perspective. As discussed in Chapter 2, the Chinese institutional and cultural environment

differs from Western societies to a large extent. Therefore, this unique social context warrants further research and is a fruitful path for advancing the literature.

3.3.4 Senior executives' work stress

It is critical to understand the work stress of senior executives because they play a pivotal role in maintaining organisational performance and well-being (J.-H. Lim et al., 2012; Luu, 2020). For instance, Steve Jobs' ill health caused a 2.6% drop in Apple's share price in one day (Markoff, 2008). Also, a meta-analysis revealed that the work stress of organisational leaders manifested in abusive behaviours at work can spill over to subordinates (Harms et al., 2017). However, senior executives remain underexplored in organisational research (Mueller & Lovell, 2013, 2015). An important reason is the difficulty of access to research elites (Berson et al., 2008; Conti & O'Neil, 2007). Also, managerial stress research often has an issue that managers are studied as a homogeneous group (e.g. Lindorff, 2001; O'Neill & Davis, 2011; Skakon et al., 2011; Yong et al., 2013). An analysis without stratifying managerial levels can obscure the context of stress research. Managers at different levels may perceive the same situation differently. For example, research shows that middle managers are more prone to suffering from job insecurity than senior executives in the event of organisational downsizing (Armstrong-Stassen, 2005).

Because senior executives have primary responsibility for managing the interface between the organisation and the environment (Birkinshaw et al., 2017; Masli et al., 2016), a specific focus of research on Chinese senior executives is productive for understanding how the Chinese institutional context influences the perception of work stress. Senior executives need to make strategic decisions which deal with the complexity of both the internal and external environment (Ganster, 2005). Working in the interface between the organisation and environment, Chinese senior executives seem to be more susceptible to institutional factors, such as political influence, a turbulent regulatory environment, and economic reforms as compared to lower-level managers. Based on a longitudinal study of a multinational company operating in China, Birkinshaw et al. (2017) discovered that senior executives played a critical role of boundary spanning, meaning that they were in charge of reconciling conflicts with external stakeholders, such as government officials. Gligorovski et al. (2018) also note that external forces such as new technologies, competition, and legal requirements produce tremendous pressure for senior executives

to initiate organisational changes. It is also been found that school principals are swamped by meeting the requirements of new policies introduced by governments (Beausaert et al., 2016). Similarly, executive nurse directors who serve on the boards of hospitals are overburdened by the inspection of service quality by a large number of government agencies and media (Kelly et al., 2016).

Senior executives face complex relationships with many different internal stakeholders (Hambrick et al., 2005a). This job context is suitable for examining how Chinese cultural values, such as *guanxi*, harmony, and respect for hierarchy influence the perception of work stress. Influenced by the cultural values, Chinese workers are circumspect in terms of the interpersonal interactions in their workplaces. Dealing with different expectations from various stakeholders can be exceptionally challenging as a result. Cullen-Lester et al. (2016) argue that boundary spanning responsibilities including reconciling differing interests and uniting different employee groups to work towards a common goal are the essential tasks of senior executive jobs. Furthermore, senior executives do not just make strategic decisions but create opportunities for making strategic decisions (Hambrick et al., 2005b). With strong aspirations and ambitions, they may abandon themselves to the excitement of pursuing some challenging goals that are possibly beyond shareholders' expectations (Hambrick et al., 2005a) or even transgress the limits of their formal job duties (Fay et al., 1998). Therefore, senior executives can put themselves into a hostile situation where they are being seen as self-serving (Cullen-Lester et al., 2016).

In summary, this section has reviewed major work stressors and relevant research in China. The review has indicated that prior research into work stressors has not sufficiently taken into account the Chinese social context. As Chapter 2 has illuminated, Chinese institutional and cultural characteristics can play a significant role in influencing the phenomenon of work stress in China. A focus on senior executives who steer their organisations in the external environment and at the same time perform a key role in managing relationships within their organisations appears to be very pertinent to the goal of exploring work stressors in the Chinese workplace. The discussion above leads to the first research question: *What stressors do Chinese senior executives experience in their work environment?*

3.4 Coping

In broad terms, coping is a response to stressors. Section 3.1 has illuminated that coping is an integral part of the stress experience as it can alleviate stress. Therefore, it is also important to understand how senior executives cope with their work stress.

3.4.1 Defining coping

There are three main approaches to studying coping, including psychoanalytical tradition, personality trait, and transactional process (Dewe et al., 2010). While these approaches to study coping are underpinned by different theoretical foundations, it is necessary to include them for a brief review to justify the decision of employing the transactional approach for this study.

First, the concept of coping derives from the psychoanalytical tradition during the time between the late nineteenth and early to middle twentieth centuries. In the psychoanalytical tradition, coping is considered as a part of a defence mechanism (Dewe et al., 2010; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Defence mechanisms such as denial, delusion, hysteria, and fantasy are considered primitive responses driven by ego to regulate distress (Aldwin, 2007; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). They are usually considered as maladaptive or immature (Aldwin, 2007; Dewe et al., 2010). However, Vaillant (1977) argued that defence mechanisms can be categorised into different hierarchies in which higher categories are more adaptive or mature. Coping is viewed as the most adaptive or mature ego process by psychoanalytic researchers as it focuses on addressing problems (e.g. Haan, 1969; Menninger, 1963; Vaillant, 1977).

The second approach to define coping is to see it as a relatively stable style of responses to a stressful situation, which can be predicted from personality traits (Lazarus, 1991). For example, Type A persons are characterised by hostility-aggression, impatience or time urgency, and competitive achievement-striving (D. Glass, 1977). On the other hand, Type B persons are non-aggressive, patient and easy-going, and non-competitive (Kirmeyer & Diamond, 1985). When they encounter threats to self-esteem, type A persons are more likely to exhibit more suppression and denial behaviours than Type B persons (Pittner & Houston, 1980). Another example is that when facing threatening situations, repressors are prone to resort to denial, avoidance, and suppression, whereas

sensitisers are inclined to intellectualisation, obsession, and ruminative worrying (De Man, 1990).

Lastly, coping can be defined as a transactional process of constant changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are created by the stressful transaction between a person and environment (Folkman, 1984; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Cognitive appraisal theory is an important hallmark of developing this theoretical perspective. The theory postulates that as soon as people perceive something at stake by the primary appraisal, they activate the secondary appraisal process that people consciously search for coping resources to ameliorate the feeling of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Although psychoanalytical and personal trait research retains its position within psychology, the transactional approach prevails in the field of coping research (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004) for at least three reasons. First, the transactional approach considers coping as a dynamic process rather than a stable style of behaviour pattern in response to stress. In comparison to the personality trait approach, the transactional approach does not predetermine a static pattern of response to stress. Instead, it examines coping efforts within specific contexts. As Lazarus and Folkman (1984, p. 142) suggest, “the more narrowly defined the context, the easier it is to link a particular coping thought or act to a contextual demand”. As a stressful situation can evolve, coping efforts are expected to change in adapting to the new conditions.

Another important distinction is that the transactional approach does not assume the quality of behaviours. For example, unlike the psychoanalytical tradition within which denial is considered as irrational and even pathological as it can diverge one's perception from reality (Aldwin, 2007), within the transactional approach, denial is not inferior to any other coping behaviours. Denial sometimes can have a positive function by keeping the vulnerable person from the danger of disorganisation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Last but not least, the transactional approach distinguishes between coping efforts and coping results (Cooper et al., 2001; Dewe & Guest, 1990). The concept of coping is underpinned by behaviours subsumed under it rather than by the success of these behaviours (Kahn et al., 1964). Under this approach, coping can comprise both successful and failed attempts, whereas the psychoanalytic approach defines coping as an adaptive

method that only produces positive outcomes (e.g. Haan, 1969; Menninger, 1963; Vaillant, 1977). That coping should be independent of coping results seems to have become a widely accepted defining boundary for studying this construct (e.g. Cooper et al., 2001; T. Cox & Ferguson, 1991).

Yet, the transactional approach is not without criticisms. The harshest comment may be that this approach only pays attention to the conscious efforts of coping. It remains contentious whether coping should be purely conceived as a conscious process, or there should be a degree of unconsciousness involved. On the one hand, scholars assert that coping may not be a fully conscious process (Aldwin, 2007; Dewe & Guest, 1990). On the other hand, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) assert that only conscious efforts should be considered as coping. They argue that automatic behaviours derived from frequent practices for handling similar situations over time should be called adaptation rather than coping.

This study follows the path of the transactional approach to study coping because of the need to set up a reasonable scope for research. Seeing coping as a process rather than through a psychoanalytical lens or a trait-like response is by no means to dismiss the existence and usefulness of unconscious coping efforts that can advance our knowledge of coping in a different path. It is crucial to draw a boundary for this research, however. This research focuses on situational responses to work stressors rather than people's adaptation process in an organisation or across a vast period of their professional development. In this sense, coping is conceptualised in this study as conscious and purposeful responses entailing a cognitive appraisal process to manage a stressful encounter at work.

3.4.2 Coping strategies

Coping can be broadly divided into cognitive and behavioural forms (Billings & Moos, 1981; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Cognitive efforts of coping can comprise analysis of problem, psychological detachment, and denying, while behavioural efforts can include rational planning, seeking help, physical avoidance, and self-isolation (Bermejo et al., 2013; Trounson & Pfeifer, 2017). Based on a review of 33 conceptual definitions of coping, Latack and Havlovic (1992) assert that behavioural and cognitive coping are two fundamental forms of coping. Beside this broad division of cognitive and behavioural

efforts, coping strategies have been categorised by other diverse dimensions, including coping functions, attitudes, methods, time, culture, and the level of social participation (Dewe & Cooper, 2017). Table 3.1 summarises these common typologies of coping.

Table 3.1: Research defining types of coping strategies (1964 – 2019)

Authors	Coping strategies	Main dimensions
Kahn et al. (1964)	Tackling core problems Managing emotions Dealing with derivative problems	Function
Roth and Cohen (1986)	Approach Avoidance	Attitude
Latack (1986)	Control Escape Symptom management	Attitude
Billings and Moos (1981)	Active cognitive Active behavioural Avoidance	Attitude
Lazarus and Folkman (1984)	Problem-focused coping Emotion-focused coping	Function
Folkman (1997), C. L. Park and Folkman (1997)	Meaning-focused coping	Function
Pargament I (1997), Pargament et al. (2000)	Religious coping	Method
Iwasaki and Mannell (2000); Joudrey and Wallace (2009)	Leisure coping	Method
Reuter and Schwarzer (2011)	Reactive coping Anticipatory coping Preventive coping Proactive coping	Time
Kuo (2013)	Collective coping	Culture
C. B. Cox et al. (2015)	Social coping Solitary coping	Individual versus social
Rodríguez et al. (2019)	Individual coping Co-active coping Collective coping	Individual versus organisational

The function of coping is perhaps the earliest approach to classifying coping strategies. For example, in the mid-1960s, Kahn et al. (1964) proposed that people can tackle the core problem making them stressed, they can manage their emotions, and they can deal with derivative problems with the core problem. Subsequently, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggest dividing coping into two main functions: problem-focused and emotion-focused. *Problem-focused coping* intends to resolve the internal or external demands, while *emotion-focused coping* aims to manage negative emotions derived from the demands. Another coping function discovered at a later stage was *meaning-focused coping* (Folkman, 1997; C. L. Park & Folkman, 1997). This can involve three major cognitive processes, including positive reappraisal, altering goals, and finding existential meaning (Folkman, 1997). Almost at the same time, C. L. Park and Folkman (1997) devised a more complex model called *situational and global meaning*. The model posits that people can either change their interpretation (situational meaning) of an adverse situation or change their beliefs and goals (global meaning) to comprehend and accept their adversities.

Besides coping function, people's attitude towards a stressful event is another way to classify coping strategies. Prominent classifications in this way include the *avoidance versus approach dichotomy* (Roth & Cohen, 1986) and the *escape versus control dichotomy* (Latack, 1986). Under the active attitude of coping (i.e. approach and control), people identify solutions for their problems, face their negative emotions, and increase knowledge and skills. In contrast, people under the passive attitude of coping (i.e. avoidance and escape), keep away from the problem physically/cognitively, and are likely to resort to substance use (Arble & Arnetz, 2017).

Furthermore, the methods of coping such as religion and leisure have received increasing attention from researchers (Dewe & Cooper, 2017; Klaassen et al., 2006; Pargament et al., 2000). Scholars believe that *religious coping* primarily serves the function of meaning-focused coping in which religious values and beliefs are used to make sense of their adversities such as rationalising and reframing the situation (Harris et al., 2013; C. L. Park, 2013). For example, J. Xu (2018) argues that Buddhism comprises a tripartite system of meaning, including existential, cognitive, and behavioural meaning. Nevertheless, Pargament (2010) contends that religion enables other functions of coping,

including building a collective identity with community, assuaging anxious emotion, problem-solving, and increasing self-esteem and self-efficacy.

With regard to *leisure coping*, Iwasaki and Mannell (2000) posit that it comprises three different strategies, including leisure companionship, leisure palliative coping, and leisure mood enhancement. Leisure companionship coping refers to enjoyable and discretionary contacts and activities with friends who can provide social support; leisure palliative coping is concerned with escaping the source of stress by keeping the body and mind busy, such as taking a vacation and doing exercise; leisure mood enhancement means participation of leisure activities that can promote positive mood and/or reduce negative mood. In the same vein, Joudrey and Wallace (2009) propose that leisure coping can be divided into passive, active, and social leisure. Passive leisure does not entail much physical exertion such as watching television and reading books; active leisure, on the other hand, requires much physical input such as running and swimming; social leisure manifest in interacting with other people.

Additionally, *future-oriented coping* with a time dimension is an emerging category of coping in which people do not only cope with their current situations but also take control of potential situations (Dewe & Cooper, 2017). Schwarzer and Luszczynska (2008) devise a framework of reactive, anticipatory, preventive, and proactive coping. Reactive coping refers to efforts used to address a harm or loss that already happened, whereas anticipatory, preventive, and proactive coping focus on possible scenarios in the future. Differences amongst these three future-oriented coping strategies are that anticipatory coping aims to tackle those inevitable threats in the near future; preventive coping helps crack down uncertain threat in a distant future; proactive coping is concerned with future challenges that have positive meaning for self-growth (Reuter & Schwarzer, 2011).

Another growing interest in classifying coping hinges on the cultural context characterised by the difference between collectivism and individualism. The dominant stress and coping literature emphasises on Western, individualistic characterises such as individual appraisal, personal control, and direct action (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). People in collectivistic societies tend to value group interest and harmony, so they tend to be reliant on others and give more consideration to the well-being of others at the same time (Kuo, 2013). Researchers found that collectivistic individuals tend to internalise

their stress through acceptance, reframing, avoidance, and honouring authority, and seek support from family, religion, and spirituality (Heppner et al., 2006; McCarty et al., 1999; A. Siu & Chang, 2011). However, Heppner et al. (2006) note that collectivistic individuals are prone to seek professional advice because of the concern of losing face in their own social networks. Yeh et al. (2006) add that not just personal face but also family face is of importance to collectivistic individuals.

While some scholars consider collective coping as a cultural phenomenon, Rodríguez et al. (2019) assert that coping has a social nature in organisations in that colleagues share coping strategies and learn from each other (*co-active coping*). Additionally, organisations and their members can directly provide structural and social support to individuals (*collective coping*) to cope with their stress. Similarly, C. B. Cox et al. (2015) agree that social coping strategies, such as seeking emotional and instructional support from others, are an independent category different from solitary coping strategies, such as cognitive distraction and taking action by the individual.

Corresponding to Folkman and Moskowitz (2004), this review indicates that there is no conclusive typology of coping strategies. The review here provides an overall understanding of the classification of coping strategies but the list, which shows a shift in attention from individual coping (e.g. function, attitude, method, and timing) to collective/social coping, is not exhaustive. However, the review reveals a trend of coping research towards collective or social coping.

3.4.3 The effectiveness of coping strategies

Ideally, actively addressing stressors tends to be more effective than palliatively alleviating emotional distress. Empirical research shows that problem-focused coping is associated with a lower level of emotional exhaustion, whereas emotion-focused coping has the opposite effect (Pogorelec et al., 2019). In a similar vein, disengagement and escapism can worsen job burnout (M.-J. Chen & Cunradi, 2008). However, there are counteractive findings supporting the effectiveness of palliative ways of coping. For example, a study of hospice workers in South Africa indicated that problem-focused coping was positively related to emotional exhaustion, whereas emotion-focused coping was more effective in keeping well-being (Sardiwalla et al., 2007). The researchers explain that it is probably because hospice workers usually face unalterable situations

such as death or illness, so adjusting their state of mind rather than changing the situation is more effective in maintaining personal equilibrium. Likewise, another study of workplace bullying reveals that focusing on the positive side of bullying encounters (e.g. personal growth) is the most effective coping strategy as it is negatively associated with all examined negative bullying responses, including those such as physical and psychological withdrawal, poor quality of patient care, and increasing distrust (Yoo & Ahn, 2020). In contrast, problem-focused coping only has a negative impact on poor quality of patient care (Yoo & Ahn, 2020). Hogh and Dofradottir (2001) note that workplace bullying is usually too arduous to be eradicated so problem-focused coping may be less effective and can even produce unwanted outcomes instigating more psychological demands. C. L. Park and Folkman (1997) add that if a stressful encounter is too overwhelming and is considered as unchangeable, people are more likely to count on meaning-focused coping.

Yet, collective/social coping has proven to be more effective than solitary/individual coping in general. For instance, C. B. Cox et al. (2015) investigated the moderating effect of solitary coping and social coping on the relationship between community violence and job-related outcomes amongst social workers. They found that engaging in solitary coping predicted a lower level of job performance when the exposure to community violence was high. In contrast, the more engagement in social coping, the less turnover intention research participants had. As a result, C. B. Cox et al. (2015, p. 354) argue that “solitary coping appeared to be less beneficial than social coping”. Likewise, a more recent empirical study indicated that collective problem-focused coping is most effective in reducing employees’ stress appraisal and organisational stress climate, whereas individual problem-focused coping is less effective (Rodríguez et al., 2019). Similarly, participating in social leisure such as spending time with friends is useful for reducing depression, whereas passive leisure activities such as watching TV alone do not produce this beneficial effect (Joudrey & Wallace, 2009). However, research by Freire et al. (2018) revealed that although seeking support from others is beneficial for well-being, an over-reliance on this strategy can discount its effect. This cited study does not examine the reason, but the researchers claim that seeking support sometimes only serves the evasive purpose of distraction, so the over-reliance on this strategy limits other coping strategies such as planning and positive reappraisal. By examining Chinese firefighters’ coping

strategies, Q. Huang et al. (2020) also found that perceived support from family and significant others encourages support seeking behaviours, but oddly, support seeking is positively associated with avoidance coping. It is possible that “even if firefighters ask others for help, others might not always support them for coping with their problems” (Q. Huang et al., 2020, p. 8). These studies show collective/social coping may not be always effective.

Increasingly, scholars argue that coping effectiveness should depend on contextual factors, including the stressor and the person (Kato, 2020; Lazarus, 1999; Pienaar, 2008). A recent study of conflicts with supervisors found that problem-focused coping reduced work-related depressive mood and job frustration only when the perceived control was high (Eatough & Chang, 2018). In contrast, when the perceived control was low, the active use of emotion-focused coping produced the beneficial outcomes (Eatough & Chang, 2018). As shown by Eatough and Chang (2018), effective coping is contingent on both coping strategies and perceived personal control. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) elucidate that emotion-focused coping can protect the person from some overwhelming stressors and help restore emotional equilibrium for addressing the stressor later. An early study also provides more support for the effectiveness of emotion-focused coping under certain circumstances. Based on the theoretical assumption that emotions could help people clarify their goal status and improve decision-making, Baker and Berenbaum (2007) conducted experiments and found that research participants who were originally not attentive to their emotions reported higher levels of positive affect after they had engaged in emotion-focused coping. Effective coping depends on contextual factors (Eatough & Chang, 2018) and no single coping strategy is always effective across all situations (Lazarus, 1999; Pienaar, 2008).

This idea is exemplified by emergent research into coping flexibility (C. Cheng et al., 2014). For example, based on a series of studies involving 11,152 participants, it was shown that coping flexibility can reduce psychological dysfunction, including anxiety, depression, and distress (Kato, 2012, 2020). According to Kato (2012), coping flexibility refers to the ability to switch from one coping strategy deemed ineffective to another coping strategy in order to better adapt to different stressful situations. Coping flexibility can also be related to one’s repertoire of coping strategies or the use of multiple coping strategies (Freire et al., 2018; Roussi et al., 2007). It has been found that the active use of

all three coping strategies, including planning, support seeking, and positive reappraisal to a greater extent produce better well-being (Freire et al., 2018). An important point is that not just because every situation is different, but situations can change overtime, more flexibility in modifying the use of coping strategies is important for succeeding in coping (Roussi et al., 2007). In short, as effective coping depends on contextual differences, it is plausible that the more flexible regarding using coping strategies the person is, the less stress the person suffers.

3.4.4 Collective coping

Although collective coping has been found to be more effective in minimising the detrimental impact of work stress than individual coping (Rodríguez et al., 2019), this coping strategy is far less studied. People often involve others in dealing with their difficult situations (Folkman, 2009). However, Folkman (2009, p. 72) asserts that “until recently, most studies of stress and coping have focused on the singular individual”. This limitation has been perpetuated in research on work stress. Rodríguez et al. (2019, p. 87) criticise the literature by saying that “all the responsibility for coping with work stress is left to the individual employee, ignoring the active role of organizations”. This argument resonates with a survey of 754 health care professionals in the U.S., showing that almost half of the research participants claimed that their organisations were obligated to investigate and address work stressors (Klein et al., 2020). Unfortunately, collective coping, where employees draw on the support of their organisations or colleagues to cope has only received marginal attention so far (Lansisalmi et al., 2000; Rodríguez et al., 2019; Torkelson et al., 2007).

As collective coping is an emerging construct, its conceptualisation is still in flux. Lansisalmi et al. (2000, p. 528) consider collective coping as “the learned, uniform responses that members within the culture manifest when trying either to remove the stressor, to change the interpretation of the situation, or to alleviate the shared negative feelings it produces”. This definition implies that organisational members learn from each other in coping, so how they cope is highly similar. Rodríguez et al. (2019) distinguish collective coping from co-active coping. Co-active coping is the phenomenon in which members of an organisation cope with their work stress in a similar way because “they interact and learn individual ways of coping from each other that seem effective and useful in their context” (Rodríguez et al., 2019, p. 88). The concept of co-active coping

is highly congruent with Lansisalmi et al.'s definition of collective coping since it emphasises the similarity of coping strategies used amongst organisational members. In comparison, Rodríguez et al. (2019, p. 88) conceptualise collective coping as "actions carried out by the whole organization or by some of its members on behalf of it, aimed at preventing, eliminating, or reducing the stressor, re-interpreting it, or relieving its harmful effects". In their view, collective coping occurs when the organisation or its members provide direct support for coping rather than simply sharing their views or methods of coping. Despite the definitional differences of collective coping, Rodríguez et al. (2019) and Lansisalmi et al. (2000) have seemingly reached a consensus that collective coping serves various coping functions, such as removing the stressor or alleviating its impacts. By and large, collective coping entails some form of organisational input to assist an individual to manage his or her work stress by targeting different coping functions. However, there is only a limited amount of empirical research on the mechanism of collective coping.

The proposition of studying collective coping lies in the assumption that employees within the same organisation are usually exposed to the same work stressors rather than facing idiosyncratic stressors (Handy, 1995; Lansisalmi et al., 2000). In a qualitative study of manufacturing workers, Lansisalmi et al. (2000) noted that in order to manage the stress of production fluctuation, the workers spontaneously developed a sense of collective responsibility and were willing to take on temporary task rotation or departmental transfer. Likewise, another study demonstrated that employees in the customer service department often resorted to collective emotion-focused coping strategies, such as venting emotions by talking to colleagues and collectively accepting their adversities (Torkelson et al., 2007).

However, collective coping seems to not always enact with the precondition of shared stressors. The literature of emotional contagion suggests that an anxious person can make his or her affiliate feel the similar emotion via facial expressions even though the affiliate does not face the same miserable encounter (Gump & Kulik, 1997). Lyons et al. (1998, p. 583) agree that "group problem-solving may be initiated for emotional and/or practical motives". Therefore, regardless of whether organisational members are exposed to the same stressors, workplace social interactions may lead to emotional contagion that can instigate collective responses. This is exemplified in research in which collective

problem-focused coping is found to have a beneficial effect on lowering both collectively experienced stressors and individually experienced stressors (Rodríguez et al., 2019).

Prior research on collective coping has largely focused on Western societies (e.g. Sweden, Finland, Spain), whereas little research has been conducted in China even though China is characterised by its collectivistic culture. This research attempts to bridge that gap. Empirical research shows that collective-efficacy rather than self-efficacy had a positive effect for coping with work stress amongst Chinese bank tellers (Schaubroeck et al., 2000). Efficacy means the perceived competency or confidence to deal with a stressful situation. Self-efficacy hinges on this perception toward oneself while collective-efficacy links to the group one belongs to. A collectivistic value embedded in Chinese organisations may explain why these Chinese bank tellers were in favour of collective-efficacy rather than self-efficacy when they encounter challenges at work.

3.4.5 Social coping

Social coping has been studied in previous research, but its conceptual boundary remains vague. A major problem is that previous research does not separate coping strategies assisted by the intra-organisational environment from those assisted by the extra-organisational environment (C. B. Cox et al., 2015; Latack & Havlovic, 1992). For example, social coping is measured by asking research participants to grade a question like “I have been getting emotional support from others” (C. B. Cox et al., 2015, p. 350). However, such a question gives no details about whether the “others” are from inside or outside of the workplace. While researchers have generally reached a consensus that coping with work stress is frequently not a solitary process (Latack & Havlovic, 1992), a clear demarcation between collective coping (i.e. with intra-organisational assistance) and social coping (i.e. with extra-organisational assistance) should be established.

In a study of school teachers, Rodríguez et al. (2019) revealed that neither individual nor collective problem-focused coping was effective in reducing work stress resulting from career concerns, organisational structure, or the imbalance between societal demands and resources. They argued that these stressors appeared to be not in the control of the individual and the organisation. Instead, local governments play a salient role in regulating career promotion, organisational structure, and budgets in the school system. Therefore, a higher level of collective coping might be more effective in tackling these

stressors (Rodríguez et al., 2019). This higher level of collective coping resonates the concept of social coping here. Rodríguez et al. (2019) point out that the wider social system is critical to address those more structural stressors. The present study employs the concept of social coping to describe the scenario of coping that the focal person who suffers from work stress seeks social resources (outside of the organisation) to deal with his or her stress. Social coping is distinct from collective coping as the latter takes place when someone is able to utilise the support provided by the organisation or its members (Peiró, 2008), whereas the former is underpinned by resources outside of the organisation.

Social coping is conceptually different from social support, although they are semantically similar. In fact, social support lacks consistent definitional boundaries and is used very loosely in research. For example, some researchers define social support at the interpersonal-level by seeing it as dependable interpersonal relationships or social networks that provide various assistance for coping (Y. Liu & Aungsuroch, 2019; Moeller & Chung-Yan, 2013), other authors interpret it at an organisational-level by including supportive organisational policies and climate (Selvarajan et al., 2013). Social support can also be informal and formal (Baig & Chang, 2020). While informal social support is given by those people within one's intimate and semi-intimate social circles (e.g. family, friends, neighbours, co-workers), formal social support is embedded in institutional settings, such as health care systems and social services (Weinberg, 2017). Despite these divergences, it is commonly seen that social support in work stress research is measured by support given by work relationships (e.g. supervisors and co-workers) and/or non-work relationships (e.g. friends and relatives) (Dawson et al., 2016; Gray-Stanley & Muramatsu, 2011). Social coping differs from social support for two reasons. Firstly, social support is a compound construct encompassing intra-organisational support as well as extra-organisational support, whereas social coping exclusively relies on the extra-organisational environment. Secondly, social coping is an overarching coping strategy, while social support can be viewed as a type of coping resource (Ito & Brotheridge, 2003; Schaufeli & Taris, 2014; X. Wang & Wang, 2017). Social support as a resource can assist social coping. For example, family members can offer their social networks to assist job losers in the family to find another job (Huffman et al., 2015), which is a problem-focused strategy of social coping.

Social coping also shares some conceptual overlap with communal coping, but they are different concepts with three distinctions. First, communal coping refers to mutual support or helps provided by people within the same communities in the face of shared adversities in the life domain, such as aging, natural disasters, or diseases (e.g. A. P. Glass & Vander Plaats, 2013; Nissen et al., 2018; Richardson & Maninger, 2016). It is concerned with “the process of joining together to cope with life stress” (Lyons et al., 1998, p. 583). With the exception of research on coping of professional athletes (e.g. Leprince et al., 2018), the stressors faced by people in communal coping are usually not work-related. Second, communal coping is underpinned by the appraisal of stressors being “our” problem rather than “my” or “your” problem (Lyons et al., 1998, p. 583). However, in the context of social coping, people within one’s social network may not encounter the same problem or threat but can still be willing to offer assistance. The third important distinction of communal coping is that it has a primary focus on interpersonal interactions within a community or group, while social coping is not only based on interpersonal connections but also supported by external institutional resources. Aldwin (2007) contends that people can draw on different institutional mechanisms to manage their stress. For example, the legal system can help in resolving conflicts in a formal way, while fortune telling can assist individuals in interpreting the cause of problem and provide suggestions for how to cope in a more culturally specific way (Aldwin, 2007). Similarly, external counselling services can also be used to manage emotional distress resulted from the workplace (Smith et al., 2020). Overall, social coping can be facilitated by informal resources (i.e. interpersonal interactions) and formal resources (i.e. institutional mechanisms).

In short, social coping requires clearer conceptualisation and empirical research because this concept is easily confused with communal coping and social support. As a relatively established concept, communal coping focuses on mutual assistance for combating shared adversities in the life domain. Also, social support that includes both support inside and outside of the workplace is conceptually too broad. Social coping that emphasises social resources being external to the organisation and does not necessitate a shared experience of stressors is an important knowledge gap in coping with work stress.

3.4.6 The role of coping resources

While the previous two sections have argued that collective coping and social coping are under-researched, a more specific limitation in coping research is resource utilisation. Based on cognitive appraisal theory, people appraise their coping resources in order to figure out a strategy to address their stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Thus, there should be mechanisms linking coping resources with coping strategies. However, the literature mainly focuses on the impact of job and personal resources on individual outcomes (e.g. turnover intention, job satisfaction, and strains), leaving very little attention to the connection between coping resources and coping strategies. A large amount of research into job resources is based on job demand-resource (JD-R) model which posits that different balances of job demands and resources can determine the level of exhaustion, disengagement, and burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001). Job resources can be defined as "positively valued physical, social, or organisational aspects of the job that are functional in achieving work goals, reduce job demands, or stimulate personal growth and development" (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014, p. 56). Research shows that job resources, such as feedback, rewards, job control, and supervisor support, can alleviate job burnout and stress (Affrunti et al., 2018; Demerouti et al., 2001). Job resources could also weaken the positive relationship between job demands and strains, such as psychological distress, psychosomatic complaints, and turnover intention (Lavoie-Tremblay et al., 2014).

While the early JD-R model is concerned with resources in the work environment, in subsequent studies, researchers started extending the model by incorporating personal resources, such as, self-efficacy, self-esteem, optimism (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007), mental competence, and emotional competence (Prieto et al., 2008). Using a broad definition, personal resources refer to "the psychological characteristics or aspects of the self that are generally associated with resiliency and that refer to the ability to control and impact one's environment successfully" (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014, p. 49). Research consistently shows findings of the positive role of personal resources in improving individual workplace well-being. For instance, Xanthopoulou et al. (2009) show that there is a positive relationship between personal resources and work engagement. Similarly, a study of elderly care workers indicates that emotion regulation skills are an important personal resource helping reduce negative emotions and improving individual well-being (Buruck et al., 2016).

Despite the growing number of studies of job and personal resources, only a small number of studies consider the relationship between coping resources and coping strategies (Dewe, 2017; Yaniv & Rabenu, 2017). A systematic review by Van den Brande et al. (2016) only identified four studies between 1984 and 2014 directly investigating this relationship. Despite a few more studies in recent years (e.g. Bakibinga et al., 2014; Yaniv & Rabenu, 2017), most studies primarily focus on personal resources. For example, Yaniv and Rabenu (2017) found that positive psychological resources, such as optimism, hope, and resilience, were significantly associated with accepting adverse work conditions rather than changing them. Similarly, Bakibinga et al. (2014) noted that religious beliefs facilitate acceptance of and finding positive meaning from adversities. Furthermore, Srivastava and Sager (1999) revealed that internal locus of control and self-efficacy promote problem-focused coping. In contrast, there is little research examining the relationship between job resources and coping strategies. Ito and Brotheridge (2003) found that job resources, such as supervisory and co-worker support, autonomy, and participation in decision-making, can enhance the use of active coping strategies, such as working harder and seeking advice and assistance, whereas a lack of these job resources can lead to avoidance.

Surprisingly, there is only fragmented research findings about social resources (being external to organisations) and social coping in a work stress context. For instance, palliative care workers in South Africa were found to use professional counselling services more to cope with their emotional distress rather than approaching their co-workers, given the time constraint and perceived unwillingness of sharing personal concerns in the workplace (Smith et al., 2020). These palliative care workers also looked for a sense of comfort and relaxation from their families and friends through routine interactions and using humor rather than discussing details of their work because they did not want to worry their families and friends (Smith et al., 2020). However, a quantitative study of social workers in Israel showed no effect of social support from friends and families on reducing job burnout (Ben-Porat & Itzhaky, 2014). The researchers explain that the social workers may have refrained from disclosing work issues to families and friends probably due to rules of confidentiality. These disparate empirical research findings suggest a need for a thorough investigation of how people utilise social resources to manage their work stress.

Overall, there is insufficient knowledge of how coping resources relate to coping strategies (Dewe, 2017; Yaniv & Rabenu, 2017). This knowledge gap leads to the black box issue of theoretical development. That is, knowledge about the effectiveness of coping strategies has accumulated (as discussed in section 3.4.3), whereas we know little about the underpinning role of coping resources. In particular, research has shown that coping strategies that are socially engaging are more effective than individual coping strategies (C. B. Cox et al., 2015; Rodríguez et al., 2019), but we have limited understanding of what resources are utilised to achieve those outcomes. On the other hand, research investigating the effects of different resources on individual outcomes continues to grow, but we are less certain about the intermediate mechanism regarding which resources are enacted through which coping strategies to achieve those outcomes. Taken together, there is a lack of thorough understanding of the holistic process of coping. This is an important limitation to be addressed because the ability to cope plays an important role in affecting the perception of work stress according to cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This study investigates how resources are utilised to cope with work stress with a focus on collective coping and social coping.

3.4.7 Coping in the Chinese context

While most studies of coping with work stress is conducted in the Western context, the Chinese context is less studied and empirical findings related to this context tend to be fragmentary. Xiao and Cooke (2012) note that there is a dearth of organisational policies regarding work-life balance at both organisational and government levels in China. While many Western societies have legislation and organisational policies (e.g. flexible work arrangement and job sharing) for promoting work-life balance, China lacks these formal means of accommodating family obligations. Providing financial incentives to compensate for overtime rather than establishing work-life balance policies is prevalent in China, which is influenced by the social ethos of prioritising materialistic improvement there (Xiao & Cooke, 2012). As a result, social resources (e.g. commercial housekeeping and family support) are often employed to address the lack of organisational support for work-life balance (Xiao & Cooke, 2012). On the other hand, researchers note that employee assistance programmes (EAP) have been introduced to Chinese workplaces, although it seems to be not widely endorsed by Chinese employees due to concerns of confidentiality and service quality (Peizhong Li, Sharar, et al., 2015; Zou, 2017).

Nonetheless, Y. Zhang et al. (2016) argue that counselling is generally well accepted amongst young people. Along with the rapid social changes, Chinese people may be provided with more choices regarding how they can cope with work stress.

A general theme from the literature is that Chinese appear to be temperate in terms of expressing emotions. Quantitative research shows that Chinese participants suppress both positive and negative emotions more than Dutch and Moluccan participants (Huwaë & Schaafsma, 2018). A qualitative study of Chinese employees found that exhibiting emotions at work can be treated as immature, while maintaining emotionally neutral is expected and senior employees with this character are worshiped by newcomers into the organisation (Y. Guo, 2019). The cultural value of harmony inherent in collectivist society appears to play a central role in accounting for emotional inhibition (Butler et al., 2007; Huwaë & Schaafsma, 2018). Although people in collectivist societies are more interdependent (Kuo, 2013), surprisingly, empirical research shows that Asians and Asian Americans are less likely to seek social support than European Americans (Taylor et al., 2004). Chun et al. (2006) explain that seeking social support by a collectivist person usually hinges on the delicate balance of taking care of the individual need, maintaining the well-being of the group, and protecting the relationship between the group and the individual. Brew and David (2004) add that Chinese people are not only concerned with their self-face but also other-face. Self-face and other-face can both give rise to abstaining from expressing negative emotions (A. C. Peng & Tjosvold, 2011). In order to protect interpersonal harmony (e.g. avoiding losing face and not exerting pressure on others), Chinese people may be less inclined to directly vent their emotions or express their distress in front of others. However, W. Li et al. (2017) contend that younger generations grow up with more cultural influence from the West. They are no longer only exposed to Chinese traditional culture but also capitalism. Along with affluence, urbanisation, single-child household, and the increasing contact with Western cultures, mainland Chinese have become more individualistic (Cai et al., 2012). For example, a study by Hamamura and Xu (2015) showed an increasing trend of using individualistic pronouns in China since 1970. This cultural change implies that Chinese people may become less circumspect in communicating their needs and emotions.

In short, China is an intriguing site for studying coping due to its unique context of transitional institutional and cultural environments. Occupational well-being research has

been scant in China (Cooke et al., 2020). As coping plays a critical role in maintaining well-being (Freire et al., 2018), it is important to investigate coping in this context.

3.4.8 Senior executives' coping

Senior executives are a pertinent occupational group for studying how coping resources are utilised to cope with work stress. A number of empirical studies consistently show that managers at the top level feel less stressed when comparing with those at lower levels (Ivancevich et al., 1982; Lokke & Madsen, 2014; L. Lu et al., 1999). A possible explanation is that despite managers facing a great deal of work stress, they may have more coping resources such as managerial power, autonomy, career development opportunities, intrinsic meaning of work, financial return, and information (Skakon et al., 2011). For example, a study by Elomaa et al. (2020) revealed that to reduce the demand of leading employees, senior executives of day-care centres actively shared their leadership with others and set up rules of common practices as a way to minimise the burden of guiding employees. In a similar vein, Kelly et al. (2016) found that benefitting from their high job autonomy, executive nurse directors were able to release themselves from work at their discretion to protect individual resilience.

Research also shows that senior executives tend to manage their emotional distress by drawing on social resources (external to organisations), such as families, friends, mentors, and professional coaches (Elomaa et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2016; Lindorff, 2001). Additionally, senior executives actively expand their external social networks to address the pressure of maintaining corporate performance. For instance, Chinese CEOs pursue directorships in trade associations because business and political connections through the trade associations can ensure preferential treatments in financing (J.-F. Yen et al., 2014). Other studies also show various positive outcomes of social networks, including a lower cost of debt capital (Qiu et al., 2019), high credit ratings (Benson et al., 2018; Khatami et al., 2016), preferential source of financing (M. Braun et al., 2019; Fogel et al., 2018), increased innovation (Helmers et al., 2017), and improved corporate governance (Y.-S. Chen et al., 2014; Pascual-Fuster & Crespí-Cladera, 2018).

As senior executives seem to have better access to job and social resources for coping, their experience of coping can help increase our understanding of collective coping and

social coping. This research seeks to answer a second research question: *How do Chinese senior executives utilise resources to cope with their work stress?*

3.5 Conclusion

Based on cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), work stress is determined by both work stressors and the ability to cope. Thus, this chapter reviewed the literature of work stressors and coping. It is found that research of work stressors in China is mostly conducted using an etic approach in which Western concepts of stressors are tested in the Chinese context. As a result, little research has explored culturally and institutionally shaped work stressors from a Chinese perspective. As for coping research, researchers have mainly examined the effectiveness of different coping strategies and coping resources. There is therefore a notable lack of research exploring the relationship between coping strategies and coping resources. This issue is particularly salient in the areas of collective coping and social coping as research predominantly focuses on individual coping. Job resources and social resources that respectively enable collective coping and social coping have not been sufficiently studied in relation to coping strategies. Chapter 2 illustrates a unique context of Chinese institutions and cultures, which appear to greatly influence the phenomenon of Chinese work stress. In order to better understand the phenomenon of work stress in China, this study focuses on Chinese senior executives. This is because senior executives perform an active boundary-spanning role inside and outside of their organisations. On the one hand, they face a complex working environment which can generate a diverse range of work stressors linked to the Chinese institutional and cultural context. On the other hand, the abundance of resources attached to their senior managerial roles provides a suitable context for understanding collective coping and social coping. The next chapter explains in detail how this study was carried out.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This study aims to identify work stressors faced by Chinese senior executives and understand how they utilise resources to cope with their work stress. First, this chapter outlines the research philosophy. Second, it discusses the use of Critical Incident Technique (CIT) in collecting research data. Next, it sheds light on the sampling process. It then explains the data collection process and challenges of interviewing Chinese senior executives. Lastly, it elaborates on the six main phases of thematic analysis in this study.

4.2 Research philosophy

It is important to be guided by a research philosophy as it lays the foundation for a researcher's ontological and epistemological position (Collis & Hussey, 2003). Ontology is commonly referred to as the nature of reality and its characteristics (Creswell, 2007; Punch, 2014). Epistemology is concerned with the relationship between the researcher and that reality (Punch, 2014). It is also considered as the theory of knowledge (Bryman, 2008), pertaining to the question as to how we know what we know (Patton, 2002).

From an ontological perspective, a fundamental question facing social researchers is whether the reality being studied has an objective nature of existence that is independent from individual perception and the influence of social interaction (Bryman, 2008). The research philosophy adopted in this study is phenomenology, assuming that "all knowing is interpretation: a person's reality is formed through the meanings they attribute to personal experience" (Welch, 2001, p. 61). The dependence on understanding the reality through others' perception of experience inevitably leads to the acceptance that knowledge never captures the entirety of reality (Barnacle, 2001). Yet, it is important to investigate individual perception because reality is multidimensional and subjective, meaning that although we never get an absolute picture of the reality, it is critical to acquire knowledge through exploring the shared essence of people's lived experience (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002).

Phenomenology resonates with the theoretical understanding of stress in this study. It allows us to consider stress as a subjective experience of the appraisal of imbalance between the demand of stressors and the resources for coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

According to the ontological and epistemological assumptions of phenomenology, consciousness is the key to understand reality. Phenomenology assumes that “we can only know what we experience by attending to perceptions and meanings that awaken our conscious awareness” (Patton, 2002, p. 105), meaning that reality is only reflected by human consciousness. Coming back to the theoretical underpinning of the present study, stress is triggered by people’s perception of threat, loss or challenge, which are essentially subjective (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Likewise, people search for suitable resources to implement coping strategies through a cognitive process, inevitably invoking consciousness. In light of phenomenology, people understand the world in relation to themselves rather than seeing themselves and the world as independent (Barnacle, 2001). It is fundamentally different from a positivist perspective where reality is independently governed by external laws and hence it is objective, stable, and universal; or a realist one where truth independently exists outside the human mind (O’Leary, 2017). From a phenomenological perspective, the work stress experience is highly subjective, residing in the consciousness of individuals.

In terms of the epistemology, this study is in line with the view offered by Welch (2001, p. 59) that “the world of positivism was unable to provide an appropriate avenue for exploring the everyday lived world of people in all its richness and complexity”. Instead of employing certain criteria to test something as truthful based on a deductive, quantitative study (Lincoln & Guba, 2000), this study employed an inductive, qualitative approach to understand the experience of work stress of Chinese senior executives by examining their perspectives on work stressors and how they utilise resources to cope. Phenomenology supports the indicative, qualitative approach since “it does not project a structure onto things in advance” (Barnacle, 2001, p. 4). Instead, it stresses the importance of an open receptivity toward the phenomenon of interest. This epistemological stance is crucial for answering research questions that requires in-depth understanding of the context. The work stress and coping literature, however, predominantly focuses on testing hypotheses by predetermined quantitative surveys, reflecting the dominant position of positivism in the field (Clegg, 2001; Dewe & Cooper, 2017; Dewe et al., 2010). While that the literature offers some understanding of the relationship between certain predetermined variables, it overlooks the broader contextual underpinning in which these relationships build up. Although research governed by positivism can shed light on

context, they are constrained by researchers' theoretical presuppositions mainly derived from Western studies. Given the distinctiveness of the Chinese cultural and institutional context, it is vital to adopt an emic perspective (i.e. insider) rather than an etic perspective (i.e. outsider) (Patton, 2002). In this regard, phenomenology is in line with the need for understanding the meaning of context from the participant's point of view in order to understand work stressors and coping.

4.3 Research design

Research design is the overarching framework of research, mainly including data collection and data analysis (Bryman, 2008). It is dictated by the research questions as well as the philosophical position (O'Leary, 2017). As explained above, this study adopted a qualitative research strategy due to the phenomenological position aiming to provide a rich description of the essence of the shared experience of stressors and coping (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). The research design of this study encompasses CIT and thematic analysis of critical incidents because the narrative accounts of critical incidents provide a structural context of experience as well as interpretations of the experience (Welch, 2001). As Byrne (2001) suggested, CIT's philosophical assumptions and applicability have evolved over time, and thus it is necessary to briefly review its origin and development so as to explain the choice of a suitable research design for the present study.

CIT is defined as "a procedure for gathering certain important facts concerning behaviour in defined situations" (Flanagan, 1954, p. 335). It was introduced by Flanagan (1954) who detailed his application in a study of combat leadership within the Aviation Psychology Program of the U.S. Army Air Forces in World War Two. The primary aim of CIT in Flanagan's combat leadership research was to find out what behaviour could be classified as effective or ineffective in accomplishing the assigned mission. Subsequently, CIT has been considered a useful tool for solving practical problems and has been applied to developing criteria for selecting, training, and evaluating job performance in diverse occupations (Byrne, 2001).

Although the philosophical stance of CIT was not elaborated by Flanagan (1954), many scholars nowadays associate its inception with a positivist paradigm because Flanagan explicitly and repeatedly articulated the importance of objectivity during data collection

(e.g. Bott & Tourish, 2016; Viergever, 2019). To this end, Flanagan (1954) proposed that factual events were collected through independent observers who had adequate knowledge and experience of the events. Objectivity could be achieved when a number of the observers made the same analytical report or judgement. The judgements were then grouped into categories of criteria that helped or hindered a certain aim. Chell (2006, p. 46) explained it well: “The essentially subjective nature of this process was converted into an objective set of criteria”. It is also noted that quantitative validity and reliability checks were performed in some early CIT studies (Butterfield et al., 2005), reflecting the dominant position of positivism in the early 20th century (Butterfield et al., 2005; Byrne, 2001).

However, increasingly researchers claim that CIT is essentially a qualitative approach (e.g. Bott & Tourish, 2016; Butterfield et al., 2005; Chell, 2006; Collis & Hussey, 2003). CIT has been considered adequately situated to a phenomenological (e.g. Chell, 2006; Collis & Hussey, 2003) or interpretive paradigm (e.g. Bott & Tourish, 2016). Butterfield et al. (2005) argue that CIT meets many characteristics of qualitative research, including those where the researcher is the instrument of data collection; data is constituted by words through interviewing or observation; data is inductively analysed; and research participants’ perspectives are valued. Likewise, Bott and Tourish (2016) add that CIT has an inherent inductive property that affords investigating context, problematising existing theories, and developing new theories. Underpinned by the phenomenological paradigm, Chell (2006, p. 48) redefines CIT as:

a qualitative interview procedure, which facilitates the investigation of significant occurrences (events, incidents, processes or issues), identified by the respondent, the way they are managed, and the outcomes of perceived effects. The objective is to gain an understanding of the incident from the perspective of the individual, taking into account cognitive, affective and behavioural elements. (p.48)

Thus, CIT is congruent with this study’s phenomenological stance and assumes that reality is based on human consciousness of their experience, requiring that the phenomenon is explored from the participants’ perspective. The narrative form of data obtained by critical incidents helps identify work stressors that are more situational

specific and avoids imposing predetermined theoretical approaches (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Another reason for employing CIT is that it tends to be culturally neutral as it does not predetermine what is important based on the existing literature (Gremier, 2004). Additionally, as a flexible research technique, CIT is no longer limited to identifying behaviours but also increasingly used to elicit people's beliefs, opinions, thoughts, and feelings in order to understand their psychological state related to a particular experience (Butterfield et al., 2005). Therefore, it has been commonly applied in studies of stressors and coping (Kemppainen et al., 2012; O'Driscoll & Cooper, 1996; Richmond & Skitmore, 2006).

4.4 Applying critical incident technique

Scholars acknowledge the need to modify the procedure of conducting CIT research (Chell, 2006; Flanagan, 1954). An extensive review of the method indicates several important aspects of consideration before CIT is implemented. The following covers these aspects, including the aim of the activity being studied, specifications of critical incidents, data collection, and the timeframe of recalled incidents (e.g. Bott & Tourish, 2016; Flanagan, 1954; Gremier, 2004).

4.4.1 The aim of activity

Fundamental preparation for using CIT should ascertain the purpose of the activity being studied, which provides a focus for collecting critical incidents. The main goal of traditional CIT research is to discover what is effective or ineffective for accomplishing something. For example, Viergever (2019, p. 1066) argues that it is appropriate to employ CIT to find out “what helps or hinders” the experience or activity under research. Although the research questions of this study are not formulated in the same way as suggested by Viergever (2019), the nature of inquiry of the study follows a similar format. It is important to note that this study does not intend to investigate the effectiveness of coping strategies. Rather, it focuses on two research questions: *What stressors do Chinese senior executives experience in their work environment? How do Chinese senior executives utilise resources to cope with their work stress?* Thus, critical incidents collected in this study require two major components of narratives. The first component focuses on stressors, containing an elaboration on the origin and the process of a work-related stressful situation, and an explanation of why the research participant thinks that

the event is stressful. The second component focuses on coping, soliciting information about what helps the research participant reduce their stress and how he or she manages this process. Table 4.1 demonstrates structure of critical incidents, including the cause, the process, and the outcome (Butterfield et al., 2005; Viergever, 2019).

Table 4.1: The main structure of critical incidents collected in this study

Cause	Process	Outcome
The origin of a stressful event	Description of the stressful event (e.g. factual details, feelings, and thoughts)	Coping resources available and how they are utilised.

4.4.2 Specifications of CIT

There are three important specifications to be followed when planning a CIT study (Flanagan, 1954). The first specification is the delimitation of the situation described by research participants. As this study focuses on work stressors and coping, it was imperative to define a stressful situation. According to cognitive appraisal theory, people's emotional states emerging from stressful experiences, usually include feeling of harm/loss, threat, or challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Nevertheless, I decided to let the stressful experiences be self-defined by the research participants as I could better maintain a culturally neutral stance to avoid imposition of theoretical assumptions from Western research. The second specification focused on what observation should be paid attention according to the aim of the study. Because this study focuses on work stressors and the connection between coping resources and coping strategies, I paid attention to content in relation to these aspects in interviews. The third specification was concerned with the definition of criticality. According to Spencer-Oatey and Harsch (2016), criticality is associated with something unexpected and unanticipated. Therefore, criticality in this study refers to those non-routine, memorable events related to the workplace, most likely provoking conscious responses rather than repetitive adaption. It is worth noting that these events not only capture serve stressors (e.g. a violent encounter) but also general stressors. For example, being appointed to establish a new plant in a different city is a memorable event that intensified a participant's multiple work roles. It provides a detailed context for me to understand the nature of role overload, a general

stressor that can trouble the participant on a daily basis. Critical incidents should also have significant impact, either positive or negative, on the participant (Bott & Tourish, 2016; Petrick et al., 2006). This is in line with the work stress literature that a stressor can be perceived positively or negatively by individuals (Webster et al., 2011).

4.4.3 Data collection methods of CIT

Despite there being other methods of collecting narrative accounts of critical incidents such as self-administered questionnaires and self-record forms (Flanagan, 1954), the semi-structured interview was adopted in this study because of four advantages. Firstly, a semi-structured interview allows for critical information to be elicited through a natural flow of conversation (Bryman, 2008). In comparison, although self-administered questionnaires can prevent bias generated from the interviewer's influence, the interviewer has little or no control over the format of critical incidents and there is no opportunity for either the interviewer or the research participant to clarify something if needed. Secondly, the semi-structured interview approach demands less time and effort on the part of research participants. In contrast, a self-record form is not practical because the research participants would be required to record the incidents as they happen, or at least write them down later. Given the busy lives of senior executives, it seems to be an unrealistic approach. Thirdly, an interview is relatively more likely to generate a holistic picture of an event. In comparison, the self-record form tends to capture very concrete and discrete events at the expense of overlooking ongoing problems or more abstract, complex events (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Lastly, a rapport of trust is critical in encouraging research participants to discuss sensitive issues, which would be easier to achieve through an interview rather than other data collection methods (Bott & Tourish, 2016).

4.4.4 CIT Timeframe

CIT studies using an interview format usually ask research participants to recall a critical incident that occurred in the past, within a particular timeframe. The concern with determining appropriate timeframes in CIT studies is primarily driven by the issue of false memory or confabulation (Bott & Tourish, 2016). As memory decays very quickly (Hardt et al., 2013), it is common for people to use the combining of different events, pieces of guesswork, and inferences to fill the memory gap when they try to make sense of their past experiences (Nahum et al., 2012). There is no agreement on setting

timeframes in CIT studies because even if the recalling period is shortened to 48 hours, 30% of variability between momentary and retrospective assessments still occurs (Stone et al., 1998). As explained previously, collecting momentary events through the self-record form is less feasible, and thus a decision regarding the recalling timeframe must be made.

This study set up a one-year timeframe initially because it was thought that this relatively recent timeframe could enable sufficient details of incidents recalled. However, the one-year criterion was removed after the pilot interview in which a research participant suggested that it restricted the ability to recall those most relevant and memorable incidents that had occurred over a longer period of time. Bott and Tourish (2016) note that board members in their study met infrequently and made strategic decisions over the long term, so limiting critical incidents to the past year would constrain the calibre of collected critical incidents. Therefore, no timeframe restriction was imposed in this study to allow more freedom for research participants to reflect and provide the most significant accounts from their perspective.

Although false memory or confabulation is inevitable in retrospective accounts, Bott and Tourish (2016) argue that from an interpretivist perspective, the significance of the events attributed by the research participants is more important than the literal accuracy of details. They claim that it is a human tendency that people create a hyper reality consisting of fact and fantasy for their own compelling account of the reality. As this study embraced a phenomenological paradigm that values interpretation of their experiences (Welch, 2001), the argument of Bott and Tourish (2016) is accepted.

4.5 Sampling

This section elaborates on the sampling criteria of this study, recruiting research participants, characteristics of the sample, and justifications of the sample size.

4.5.1 The criteria of sampling

While quantitative research is usually linked to probability sampling that aims to achieve representativeness of a larger population, qualitative research usually employs purposive sampling (Punch, 2014). Purposive sampling does not aim to achieve the goal of generalisability but to “establish a good correspondence between research questions and sampling” (Bryman, 2008, p. 458). This means that selected research participants should

have experience relevant to the research questions. Besides, sampling decisions should consistently follow the study's logic (Punch, 2014) and theoretical assumptions (R. K. Yin, 2014). Underpinned by these principles, the criteria for sampling in this study include seven main aspects: managerial level, length of service, corporate size, corporate ownership type, manager identity, a relatively homogenous economic geographic area, and diversity of industries.

First of all, responsibilities for strategic planning (Ganster, 2005) and performance at an organisation-wide level (Hambrick et al., 2005a) are important parameters to consider in terms of choosing senior executives as research participants. A pragmatic selection of research participants would be "the CEO and his or her immediate subordinates, including the heads of functional areas" (Stock et al., 2014). In this case, research participants' managerial ranks should be above departmental managers. For example, in this study, a manager who is only responsible for a business unit (e.g. a store manager in location A) was not considered as a senior executive but the director who is responsible for managing all or several business units (e.g. an operational director responsible for stores in location A, B, C, and D) was considered to be a senior executive.

Secondly, the research participants must work in medium or large enterprises where a more hierarchical structure is able to distinguish senior executives from middle-level and frontline managers. According to NBSPRC (2017), medium or large enterprises meet one or two of three criteria (depending on industries) related to employee numbers, revenue, and total assets. Since recruiting senior executives for research interviews is particularly challenging (Goldman & Swayze, 2012), if the criteria were too precise and complicated, it would significantly hamper the recruitment. Therefore, only employee numbers were considered as an indicator of corporate size in this study. However, the number of employees according to NBSPRC varies widely across industries in determining corporate size. For example, for companies in the wholesale industry to be considered as medium size, the threshold is 20 employees, while the number for those in the property management industry should be no less than 300. For the purpose of this study, a company only having 20 employees would have been too flat in terms of hierarchical structure. As a result, a standard was needed for consistency in recruiting research participants. Because in most industries, 100 employees are the minimum requirement for being

classified as a medium enterprise according to NBSPRC, the number of 100 employees was used as the indicator of corporate size meeting the purpose of this study.

The third criterion was that participants had been serving the same enterprises in their current managerial roles for at least one year. This requirement ensures that participants have sufficient institutional knowledge and experience regarding interpersonal relationships, corporate culture, and other social facets entwined within their roles and organisations.

The literature shows that ownership type is an important distinction in the corporate environment in China where senior executives are exposed to different stressors and their coping resources can differ. Thus, in order to achieve a relatively comprehensive data set, research participants were recruited from three main economic sectors, including SOEs, POEs, and MOEs in China. While SOEs are wholly owned by the state's representative bodies, POEs are wholly owned by private entities such as an individual or other POEs. MOEs contain both state and non-state shareholders.

As for manager identity, the study sought professional managers rather than corporate owners. This criterion is not relevant to senior executives from SOEs. Regarding senior executives from POEs, this is an important criterion because the study focuses on professional managers rather than entrepreneurs. However, this requirement was not applied to MOEs because employee stocks ownership is an important means of the mixed-ownership reform (SASAC, 2016; J. Wang & Tan, 2020). According to the state's document regarding the opinion on promoting employee stocks ownership in the SOEs, employees who are eligible for purchasing company stocks include researchers, managerial personnel, and leaders of business who should have made significant contributions in corporate performance and sustainable development; when the employees who own some stocks in a company resign, they must sell the stocks to other shareholders within the company (SASAC, 2016). From this perspective, the employee ownership of stocks appears to be institutionalised as an employee incentive programme in MOEs. For this reason, senior executives from MOEs who hold a small portion of stocks in the company should not be precluded.

Another criterion is the geographic location of enterprises in which senior executives work. China is characterised by its diverse culture and norms (T. T. Liu & Faure, 1996)

as well as economic development disparity amongst different regions (Z. Wang, 2015). It is therefore important to consider a particular geographic location that can provide a relatively homogenous context for this study. Guangdong province was selected because it has been a pioneering area in terms of opening up and reform since 1979, and has relatively high autonomy in its economic development (Johnson, 2002). For example, while many other provinces had to comply with the rule of “unified purchase and sale” in the early 1980s, Guangdong was granted many increased autonomous rights of administration such as foreign trade, foreign direct investment, wage standard setting, and company management (N. Chen, 2015). Guangdong has become one of the most robust economic areas in China where diverse economic sectors co-exist. For example, it was the largest GDP contributor amongst all provinces in 2019 and also the first province whose GDP exceeded ten trillion (China News, 2020). POEs accounted for 54 percent of the province’s GDP and correspondingly the number of patents generated by POEs was more than half of the total number within the province (China Daily, 2019). Although the latest statistic is not available, in 2014 the number of MOEs was approximately 40 percent of the total number of state-invested companies (including wholly state-owned and mixed ownership) in Guangdong (Bu, 2014). Thus, Guangdong was selected for recruiting research participants because this is a good representation of the transitional economy of China.

It is worth noting that the sampling criteria for this study did not set an industry boundary. Bryman (2008) contends that qualitative research needs to consider a combination of heterogeneity and homogeneity in sampling because it gives researchers an adequate power of control in comparing findings. Further, “any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon” (Patton, 2002, p. 234). That is, searching for the invariant essence of experience is of particular importance to the study underpinned by phenomenology (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). By purposely including different industries, this sampling strategy helps achieve a comprehensive account of different job contexts.

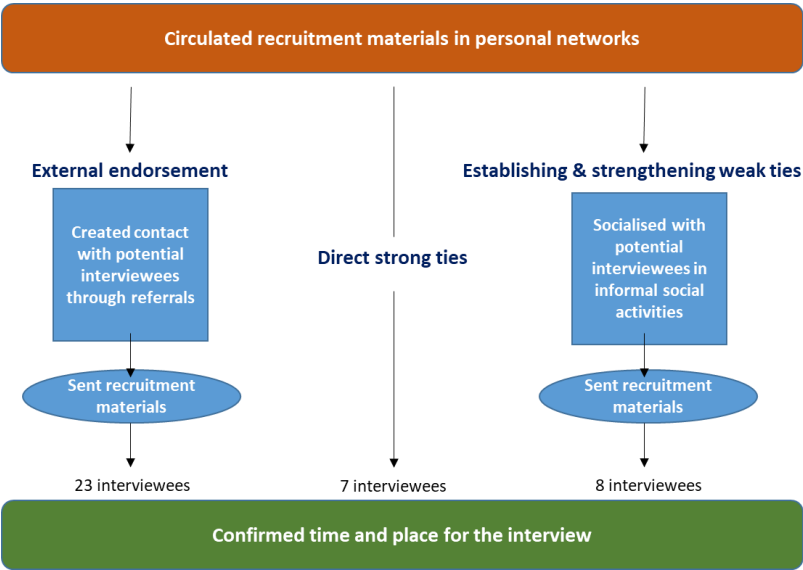
4.5.2 Recruiting research participants

Gaining access to senior executives is usually very challenging to researchers because the organisational hierarchy is designed to protect them and to deter outsiders from learning

about them (Hertz & Imber, 1995). Also, senior executives might be unwilling to disclose their feelings of work stress because of the fear of potential negative impacts on their careers (Rook et al., 2016). Research shows that cold-calling is not a very effective way to recruit elites, such as senior executives, for research, while personal networks and referrals are relatively more effective (Conti & O’Neil, 2007; Goldman & Swayze, 2012). This seems to be particularly true in the Chinese context where personal face and social recognition are important. Therefore, the sampling process in this study significantly relied on my social networks.

Guanxi has been considered to be an essential factor in recruiting senior staff such as CEOs or executive-level managers in China (Orr & Menzies, 2012). Recruitment facilitated by guanxi include drawing on existing strong ties, external endorsement, and establishing and strengthening weak ties (Orr & Menzies, 2012). The recruitment strategies employed in this study were underpinned by these three mechanisms as illustrated by Figure 4.1. Despite the three different paths of recruitment, I fully informed the potential research participants about the study by sending them the full information package including an information sheet, consent form, recruitment flyer, and interview questionnaire (see Appendix A, B, C, and Table 4.2 respectively)⁴ at the first stage of the recruiting process.

Figure 4.1: The recruiting process



⁴ These recruiting materials were all translated into Chinese.

The research participant recruitment started in June and finished in October of 2018 in China. First of all, I utilised the existing strong ties within my own social networks such as friends and acquaintances to invite them to participate in an interview. In order to avoid any perceived coercion, the voluntary principle of participation was strictly enforced. It was clearly stressed in the information sheet. If the potential research participant did not respond to the initial invitation, I did not approach them again. If the person agreed to participate, then I scheduled a time and place for the interview. The first method eventually recruited seven research participants.

The second way of recruiting research participants was based on the idea of external endorsement (Orr & Menzies, 2012) through referral by my strong ties such as close friends and relatives. For example, an older friend referred me as his *xiao xiong di* (i.e. little brother) when he introduced me to a potential research participant. By referral, 23 suitable research participants were interviewed, representing the largest number of research participants amongst the three paths. The research participants were connected to my referrers through a wide range of social networks such as MBA programme alumni, *tong xiang hui*,⁵ interest clubs, and work-related relationships.

The third way of recruitment took a more active form, that is, I directly established and strengthened my weak ties with the potential research participants through participating in their social activities. Such an opportunity was offered by referrers. The social activities included a two-day art and hot spring retreat, art exhibitions, cultural and health seminars, family dinner parties, and other informal gatherings. On various occasions, I strengthened some weak ties built in the past and also established new ties with people who I met for the first time in those social activities. The informal social occasions helped greatly in building shared understanding and trust with each other which effectively helped cultivate a feeling of in-group belonging and intimacy, and they helped to reduce social distance. For example, in the art and hot spring retreat, after a whole day of interactions such as visiting villages together, creating art together, and having lunch and dinner together, a research participant spent nearly one and a half hours with me for the interview after I obtained his consent. To ensure that research participation was voluntary, I provided full recruitment materials (e.g. information sheet, interview questions, and consent form)

⁵ Tong xiang hui refers to social clubs consisting people from the same hometown.

before conducting the interview. Research participants were fully informed that they could withdraw from the interview at any time if they wanted. This path of recruitment eventually recruited eight research participants.

4.5.3 The characteristics of the sample

The sample consisted of 38 senior executives (see Table 4.2 for detailed information on research participants on the next page). There were 14, 14, and 10 research participants from SOEs, POEs, and MOEs respectively. Most research participants were male ($n = 31$) but there were seven female research participants in total. This gender composition is not surprising as the over representation of males in top management teams is common (Dezső & Ross, 2012; Frye & Pham, 2018). The average age was 45 years within a span from 32 to 58 years.

All research participants held senior managerial positions with diverse job titles. For keeping participants' identities confidential, they are categorised into four different generic titles rather than specifying their actual job titles. The CEO level contains chief executive officer (CEO) and general managers. The deputy CEO level comprises deputy CEO and deputy general managers. The assistant CEO level refers to managers assisting the CEO or Chairman to develop and implement business strategies, establishing organisational policies, and coordinating different departments. The chief functional officer level includes managers responsible for a particular functional area (or more) of their corporations, in which case, their managerial authority is higher than the head of a unit or department. The proportions of these four generic managerial roles are illustrated in Figure 4.2 below.

Figure 4.2: Distribution of research participants according to their managerial roles

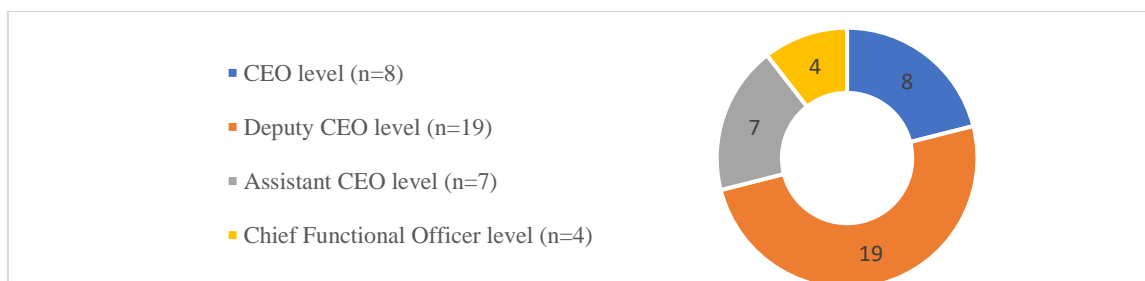
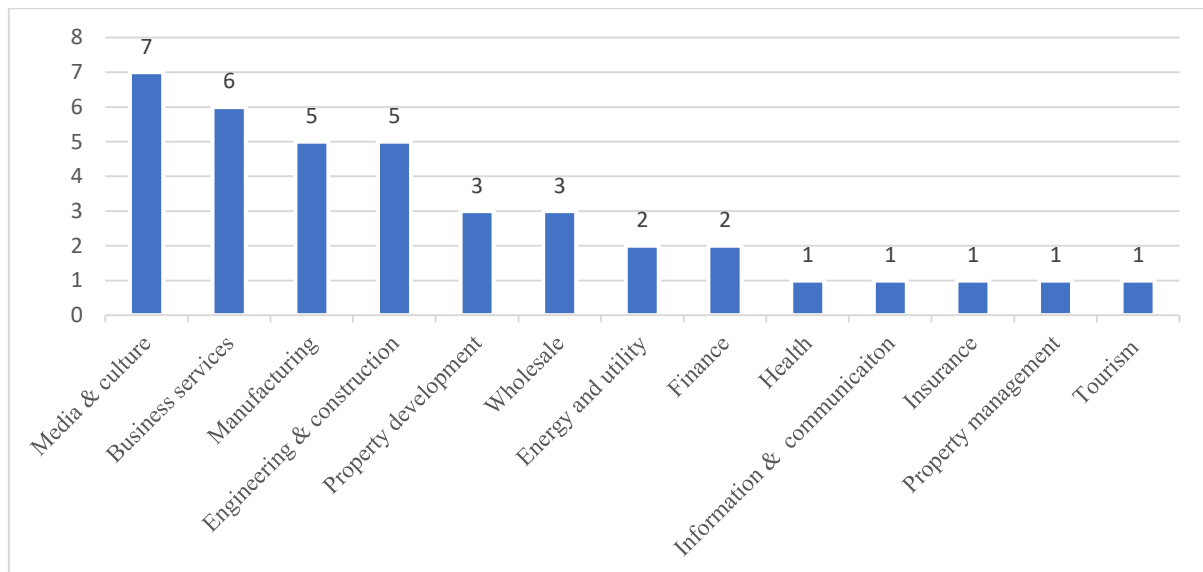


Table 4.2: Information of research participants

Sector	N o.	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Position	Industry	Employee number
SOEs	1	Ming	M	54	Assistant CEO level	Business service	>200
	2	Liang	M	49	Chief Functional Officer level	Media & culture	>2000
	3	Jie	M	51	Chief Functional Officer level	Engineering & Construction	>2000
	4	Hui	M	39	Deputy CEO level	Finance	>100
	5	Chaowei	M	57	Chief Functional Officer level	Media & culture	>1000
	6	Guanjie	M	45	Deputy CEO level	Information transmission	>2000
	7	Di	M	58	Deputy CEO level	Business service	>1000
	8	Feifei	F	38	Deputy CEO level	Business service	>100
	9	Peng	M	41	Deputy CEO level	Business service	>200
	10	Chao	M	39	CEO level	Engineering and Construction	>5000
	11	Wen	M	55	CEO level	Engineering & Construction	>1500
	12	Feng	M	38	Deputy CEO level	Media & culture	>200
	13	Hujun	M	54	Deputy CEO level	Energy & utility	>5000
	14	Zhaowei	F	52	Deputy CEO level	Media and culture	>100
POEs	15	Youjia	M	37	Deputy CEO level	Manufacturing	>2000
	16	Xiaoming	M	40	Deputy CEO level	Property development	>300
	17	Hong	F	38	Deputy CEO level	Business service	>130
	18	Qikun	M	32	Assistant CEO level	Media & culture	>200
	19	Ziqi	F	38	Assistant CEO level	Property development	>700
	20	Xueyou	M	41	Deputy CEO level	Property management	>2000
	21	Fucheng	M	52	CEO level	Wholesale	>100
	22	Dehua	M	33	Deputy CEO level	Wholesale	>200
	23	Jianhua	M	32	Assistant CEO level	Wholesale	>150
	24	Zhiling	F	35	Assistant CEO level	Health technology	>200
	25	Han	M	34	Deputy CEO level	Engineering & Construction	>1500
	26	Ronghao	M	45	Deputy CEO level	Manufacturing	>1000
	27	Yifan	M	48	Deputy CEO level	Manufacturing	>400
	28	Weibo	M	57	Chief Functional Officer level	Manufacturing	>4000
MOEs	29	Junjie	M	48	Assistant CEO level	Energy & utility	>1000
	30	Xianqi	M	44	CEO level	Finance	>300
	31	Yangyang	M	38	Deputy CEO level	Manufacturing	>18000
	32	Shuqi	F	43	CEO level	Tourism	>150
	33	Jiaxin	F	51	Deputy CEO level	Media & culture	>100
	34	Zitao	M	50	CEO level	Property development	>1000
	35	Wujing	M	53	Deputy CEO level	Insurance	>500
	36	Dawei	M	48	CEO level	Business service	>100
	37	Lun	M	47	Assistant CEO level	Engineering & Construction	>1500
	38	Chang	M	46	CEO level	Media & culture	>100

With regard to the type of industries, as shown in Figure 4.3, a greater number of research participants could be found in media and culture, business services, manufacturing, and engineering and construction. Relatively prevalent industries in the sample included property development, wholesale, energy and utility, and finance. Other relevant but less prominent industries included health, information and communication, insurance, property management, and tourism. In short, the sample was quite diverse in terms of industrial types.

Figure 4.3: Distribution of research participants according to industries



In terms of employee number, it ranged from 100 staff to over 18000 staff. Sixteen research participants' enterprises employ over 100 but below 300 staff; five research participants' enterprises have staff in a range between 300 and 1000; eight research participants' enterprises hired staff above 1000 but below 2000; five research participants' enterprises employ over 2000 staff; and four research participants came from enterprises employing over 4000 staff or more. The enterprises that have a large number of employees (i.e. over 1000) were in the primary industries such as manufacturing, engineering and construction, energy and utility. In contrast, the enterprises within tertiary industries, such as media and culture, business services, wholesale, finance, and tourism, employ relatively fewer staff (i.e. below 300). Generally, the research participants' enterprises are large in terms of employee numbers.

4.5.4 Justifications of sample size

The term, sample size, is used inconsistently in the CIT literature. For example, while Flanagan (1954) saw it as the number of critical incidents reported, Gremler (2004) treated it as the number of research participants. Both aspects are important for evaluating the sample size because the number of participants can determine the first level of richness of data while the number of critical incidents reported by each research participant constitutes the second level of data richness.

In order to determine the overall richness of data in interview-based research, thematic or theoretical saturation is probably the most used principle (Bryman, 2008; Vasileiou et al., 2018). Yet, the criteria for deciding when saturation has been achieved remains vague (Bryman, 2008; Morse, 2015b). Besides, there are also genuine constraints or pragmatic considerations such as time, cost, difficulty of access to certain research populations, and limited availability of participants that could limit the chance of achieving saturation (Bryman, 2008; Vasileiou et al., 2018). Instead of drawing on the principle of data saturation, the decision on when to stop recruiting more research participants was based on pragmatic considerations, meeting sampling criteria, richness and volume of data, and on comparisons with sampling guidelines in existing studies (Vasileiou et al., 2018).

The most fundamental pragmatic consideration was the difficulty of getting access to senior executives (Goldman & Swayze, 2012). Although social networks were very useful for recruiting research participants at the outset, they were finite due to not only the limited number of contacts but also a constraint on time and cost required to expand the social network during the fieldwork in China.

In addition to the pragmatic considerations, Vasileiou et al. (2018) argue that sample sizes can be justified by the condition of meeting the predetermined sampling requirements. All major sampling criteria were met. In particular, the representation of SOEs, POEs, and MOEs was relatively balanced within the whole sample. Also, a wide variety of job contexts indicated by the diverse industries was achieved. The sample reached a satisfactory degree of heterogeneity for an in-depth analysis.

Next, the 38 research participants provided 98 usable critical incidents. In most cases, the research participants provided two to three incidents per person. The average length of interview was approximately 55 minutes. Multiple critical incidents reported by the same

research participant and the ample time of interview ensured comprehensive accounts of situations and sufficient details in the content.

Lastly, sample size in qualitative research is generally small (Collis & Hussey, 2003). For instance, Bott and Tourish (2016) state that the number of collected critical incidents in qualitative leadership studies using CIT ranges from 32 to 89. Yet, as seen in a literature review by Gremler (2004), the range of critical incident numbers can be as wide as from 22 to 2505. However, this variation may be due to the fact that CIT studies have been long influenced by the positivist, quantitative tradition of inquiry. For example, Preston's study in 1948 (as cited in Flanagan, 1954) interviewed 640 officers of the U.S. Air Force who provided 3029 critical incidents. However, as already discussed above, CIT has been increasingly considered as a qualitative method (Bott & Tourish, 2016; Chell, 2006; Chell & Pittaway, 1998; Viergever, 2019), and there have been many examples of relatively small samples sizes in CIT research. For example, Richmond and Skitmore (2006) obtained 50 critical incidents related to stress and coping from 12 managers in a large ICT organisation.

In short, based on some pragmatic considerations, meeting all sampling criteria, the richness and volume of data, and the adequate sample size in comparison with existing research, the sample size of this study was considered to be sufficient to generate solid findings.

4.6 Data collection

This study collected narrative accounts of critical incidents by interviewing research participants. This section elaborates on the conduct of pilot interviews, the process of actual interviews, challenges of interviewing senior executives, and ethical considerations.

4.6.1 Pilot interview

Before collecting the actual data, I conducted two pilot interviews to become familiar with the interview process and identify potential issues (Bryman, 2008). I recruited two pilot research participants through my personal network. Fangfang (pseudonym) is a deputy CEO (female) in a manufacturing company, while Mingming (pseudonym) is a general manager assistant (male) in a large branch of a bank.

The pilot interview with Fangfang identified two issues. First, Fangfang took quite a while to remember a critical incident. After the interview, I asked if she had encountered any difficulty answering the interview questions. She thought that she would only be asked some general questions about work stress rather than a detailed narrative of an event, so she spent time thinking over a suitable incident. It appeared that having to spend too much time recalling and selecting a critical incident might be an issue given the busy work life of senior executives. The other issue brought up by Fangfang was that she talked about two unrelated organisations that she had served in, but the interview protocol needed critical incidents that happened within the same organisation to maintain the consistency of organisational context.

As for Mingming, he said that the details regarding the interview format given in the information sheet and the recruitment flyer was insufficient. Although I briefed the detailed requirements as to what could be counted as a critical incident at the beginning of the interview, Mingming experienced some difficulty recalling a pertinent incident at the interview, which was similar to Fangfang's case. He suggested providing a list of major requirements prior to the interview. He also provided a useful note that senior executives are usually very busy so they may not prepare the interview far in advance, so it is more effective for the list to be sent not too long before the interview.

Another issue brought up by Mingming was the one-year timeframe within which a critical incident took place. As explained earlier in section 4.4.4, the one-year timeframe was formulated due to the concern of memory limitation. However, Mingming talked about a critical incident that had happened about two years ago and he pointed out that the incident was highly relevant to work stress and it was memorable. Mingming's case revealed that an overly restricted timeframe for the critical incident could limit the number of useful critical incidents and disadvantage the research participants' perspective.

By reviewing the interview transcripts of both pilot research participants, I identified a further problem. That is, coping strategies identified in the pilot interviews were mainly problem-focused rather than other coping strategies such as emotion-focused or meaning-focused ones. It was probably caused by the pilot interview question which asked what they "did" in response to the critical incident. This interview question seemed to overly

emphasise actions for a solution rather than an open question allowing other coping strategies to be recounted.

Following reflection on all the feedback, I made several changes. Firstly, in order to allow research participants to fully reflect on their coping strategies, I asked how they “dealt with” their stress rather than what they “did” to address the incident. This is because the original interview question emphasised actions to address the stressor (i.e. problem-focused coping) so it restricted the disclosure of other coping strategies. Secondly, as mentioned by both pilot research participants, there was the lack of clarity in advance in terms of what qualified as a critical incident. Thus, I prepared a few short instructions about the critical incident format in bullet points (see Table 4.3 below), and sent them with the interview questionnaire⁶ to the research participants via WeChat⁷ one day prior to the actual interview. Although a few research participants in the actual study did not prepare well according to the instructions, most of them generally followed the instructions. The last issue identified by Mingming was the tight time restriction of the one-year for critical incidents. After careful consideration (see section 4.4.4), this criterion was taken out.

Table 4.3: Interview instructions sent to research participants before the interviews

This interview aims to understand how you as a senior executive deal with your work stress. Please note the three requirements for the interview:

1. You need to recall three critical incidents that made you feel stressed at work.
2. You need to provide a very detailed account of the incident rather than generally describing an issue. Your account should include the cause of the incident, the process, and your responses to the induced stress.
3. A critical incident means that it is non-routine and has significant impacts on you.
4. All three incidents should have occurred in the same company.

⁶ The interview questionnaire was explicitly required by the university’s Human Ethics Committee to be sent to the participants in advance before the interview consent was sought.

⁷ A mainstream mobile communication application in China, similar to WhatsApp.

4.6.2 Research interview

All interviews were conducted in either Mandarin or Cantonese.⁸ Most interviews were conducted face-to-face (n=34), while there were only a few phone or video interviews (n=4). The interviews were conducted in many different settings, such as a café, a library, the research participant's home or office. Interestingly, although a few research participants chose to be interviewed in their own offices or meeting rooms in their companies, they were very open to talk about their stressful encounters, even those involving conflicts with their bosses or colleagues. It is counter to the claim that ideally the workplace should be avoided for interviewing as the research participant could be afraid of being accidentally overheard when being interviewed about sensitive topics (Harvey, 2010; McDowell, 1998).

The interview was conducted according to a semi-structured interview protocol containing five phases: 1) briefing, 2) obtaining consent, 3) background questions, 4) critical incident interview, 5) debriefing. It is important to establish rapport with and diminish any concern of research participants at the beginning of interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). On that account, before I asked any question, a briefing was given to the research participants to ensure they knew my background, purposes of the research, confidentiality of identity, the use of data, and the ability to withdraw from the research.

In the second phase, interview consent either by signing a consent form or oral consent was obtained before proceeding with the interview. The great majority of research participants agreed to be audio recorded but displayed some sort of hesitation to sign the form. In this case, I provided the alternative of oral consent. With the permission of the research participant, I turned on the sound recorder, and then I read the consent form sentence-by-sentence and asked them if they agreed to be interviewed under the conditions described in the consent form. Another scenario was that the research participant refused to be audio recorded but agreed to sign the consent form for non-audio recording (see Appendix B). Similarly, most research participants agreed on sound recording (n=32), whereas only a few refused (n=6). When sound recording was refused, I respectfully expressed understanding and took notes instead. In order to preserve my

⁸ I am a native speaker Mandarin and Cantonese; Cantonese is the main native language in Guangdong province while Mandarin is the official language throughout China.

memory to the best extent, I summarised the critical incidents with the aid of notes immediately after the interview. I usually completed this task in a café or a restaurant near to the interview location. Although it was impossible to remember everything of the interview, the main structure and the essence of their stories were captured by the notes. The average word count for each of these six interview summaries is 3317, indicating a good level of detail.

In the third phase, I asked a few background questions such as the research participant's job position, duties, the structure of the companies, shareholders, major businesses, and the number of employees. These questions helped establish rapport for interview and also provided me with some understanding of the research participants' jobs and organisations, facilitating the next phase of interview. Private questions such as marital status and age were postponed until the end of the interview to avoid discomfort that might affect the willingness of the participants to engage in the interview.

The fourth phase of the interview was asking questions related to critical incidents. In designing interview questions, Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) suggest a translation from thematic research questions into interview questions so that the language and structure of the questions can be more colloquial and conversational rather than academic and theoretical. Table 4.4 demonstrates the linkage between research questions and interview questions. Before I asked any critical incident related question, I explained the specifications of critical incidents (see Table 4.3 above) again to the research participants.

Table 4.4: Semi-structured interview questions

Research questions	Interview questions
What stressors do Chinese senior executives experience in their work environment?	<p>1. In your current position as a senior executive, could you please recall and describe three incidents that occurred in your workplace that made you feel stressed?</p> <p>2. Could you tell me what made you feel stressed in the incident?</p> <p>3. Could you tell me why this is stressful?</p>

How do Chinese senior executives utilise resources to cope with their work stress?	<p>4. Did you find something, or someone, very helpful for you to deal with your stress during the incident?</p> <p>5. Did your company provide any help for you to deal with your stress during the incident?</p> <p>6. Did you seek help from outside of your workplace for dealing with your stress during the incident?</p> <p>7. Did you experience any difficulty to deal with your stress during the incident?</p>
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I firstly asked the research participants to recall three critical incidents related to their work stress and describe each of them at a time. The detailed description of a critical incident related to work stress helped identify work stressors. In order to identify the work stressor related to the critical incident from the research participant's perspective, subsequent interview questions asked the research participant to explain what made him or her feel stressed in the incident and why it was stressful.

Next, in order to answer the second research question as to how Chinese senior executives utilise resources to cope with their work stress, I asked the research participant what or who was very helpful for dealing with their stress during the critical incident. In answering this question, research participants usually described their coping strategies. If the research participant only talked about their personal resources (e.g. optimism or problem-solving abilities) for coping, the next question supported the research participant to reflect on whether the company provided assistance for coping. This interview question reflects the focus of collective coping discussed in Chapter 3 – section 3.4.4. Interview question six was designed to elicit information about social coping discussed in Chapter 3 – section 3.4.5. Interview question seven asked the research participant to recall any difficulties in coping, and to provide explanatory information about the coping strategies they had chosen.

It is important to note that the semi-structured interview questionnaire was used as a guiding tool while allowing the research participants to depict their stories in their own way. This meant that sometimes they already provided an account about how they coped

along the way they were describing the incident. As the interview process was so dynamic, I also asked probing questions in tune with the flow of the interview. For example, “Could you tell me more about the process?” and, “Why is that?”. These context-specific probing questions were critical as they elicited more contextual details and explored the perspective of the research participants.

During the last phase of the interview, I asked if the research participant had anything else to add or they had any questions regarding the interview. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) suggest that after interviews, research participants might experience some tension, anxiety, or emptiness because they have been open about their personal and emotional experiences. Thus, debriefing is suggested to ensure a more equal exchange of information to ease any potential concern or issue.

4.6.3 Challenges of interviewing Chinese senior executives

Interviewing elites has been widely considered to be a challenging task (e.g. Harvey, 2010; Odendahl & Shaw, 2002). Issues include getting access, scheduling time for interviews, questioning the credential of researchers, talking down to the interviewer, a dismissive attitude, and disruption by busy work (Conti & O’Neil, 2007; Goldman & Swayze, 2012). While these issues were all noted during the fieldwork of interviewing senior executives in China, three significant challenges deserve some reflection here as overcoming these challenges formed a very important part of the doctoral training.

4.6.3.1 Scheduling a time for the interview

The difficulty of scheduling time for interviewing elites is well recognised in the literature (Harvey, 2010; Odendahl & Shaw, 2002). Some research participants in this study changed the scheduled time for the interview, while others were just unable to pin down a time. In an extreme case, I was asked by the research participant to reschedule the interview three times. The change of schedule caused significant disruption of work plans and also affected my work-life balance to some extent.

Goldman and Swayze (2012) found that it was important to establish a good relationship with the assistants or secretaries of corporate elites in the U.S. as they could offer invaluable help in arranging the interviews with the bosses. However, I never arranged a time for the interview through their assistants or secretaries in this study. This is because most interviews were scheduled with the help of referrals via social networks rather than

cold calling. This precisely reflects the importance of *guanxi* in China for recruiting elites for research interviews. Besides, work stress is in itself a sensitive topic for Chinese senior executives. To avoid any embarrassment to the research participants, it was my intention not to approach their assistants or secretaries. Yet, without the help of their secretaries or assistants, there was an increased challenge of scheduling their time. It required much persistence and tolerance to schedule interviews and accommodate any changes in the interview schedules.

4.6.3.2 Dealing with power asymmetry

Power asymmetry usually refers to a situation where the interviewer has a higher authority regarding the control of interview and is perceived to have greater expertise than the research participant (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Yet, interviewing elites like senior executives means a reverse situation (Conti & O’Neil, 2007; Harvey, 2010). For example, once, when I asked a research participant to describe a critical incident, he did not directly answer the question. Instead, he questioned the adequacy of researching work stress. He made some very harsh comments such as, “Your research is a false-proposition”, and, “The *zhan wei* of your research is not high”. His words immediately provoked embarrassment and despondency.⁹ While I was challenged with managing my emotions, I forced myself to focus on the interview.

Conti and O’Neil (2007, p. 79) contend that “the issue of authority imposed by elites in interviews must be strategically managed”. Through reflection after the interview, I identified three main attempts as to how the negative emotions were managed. First, I explained my theoretical understanding about work stress and the intent of interview questions to re-establish my authority on the topic. As Odendahl and Shaw (2002) argue, maintaining the authority of the interviewer is important for a productive exchange when interviewing elites. Secondly, I reframed the situation as a positive situation that I could learn from and I expressed my appreciation for the research participant’s feedback. These two attempts effectively helped reduce the tension and emotional distraction, so I was able to carry on the interview.

The third coping effort was to write a fieldwork note after the interview and send it to my PhD supervisors as a way of reflecting on and discussing the issue. Both PhD supervisors

⁹ *Zhan wei* means value or meaningfulness in this context

provided me with a positive acknowledgement of how I managed the tension and provided emotional support. The primary supervisor replied in an email after she read my field note:

I hope that you are feeling alright? If you need to skype to talk about it then let me know... I think you have reflected very well in your notes. It is true that occasionally you will meet a person that will challenge you in that way... You did the right thing. Your research sample and approach are clear and well thought through, but there are always different ways things could have been approached or could be viewed – but you have chosen to do it this way and we support you in that...

The supervisor's words gave me enormous security and confidence and I was able to pull myself together quickly and move forward with the fieldwork. By taking the above initiative, I felt I had accumulated some experience to manage a similar situation onward. Although only one more similar situation happened later, the process of managing the power asymmetry issue was an invaluable part of the research training.

4.6.3.3 *Handling emotional moments*

Chell (2006, p. 48) argues that handling emotions is a critical skill for conducting critical incident interviews. There were some behavioural signs displayed during the interview, ranging from the mild (i.e. faster talking, high-pitched voice, and a sudden pause) to the strong (i.e. watery eyes, choking, and even crying) end of an emotional continuum amongst some research participants in this study. The need to take care of the well-being of the research participants as well as myself became apparent when these situations happened. For example, one research participant choked and cried when she was depicting how she was humiliated by her colleague. In another case, it was noticeable that a participant had tears in her eyes when expressing sadness about her divorce.

I took care of the emotional moments according to the protocol documented in the information sheet. For example, when I noticed those strong signs of emotional distress, I asked the research participants whether they needed a moment to adjust and reminded them of the option of rescheduling the interview at another time or even withdrawing completely. Also, I turned off the sound recorder if they decided to stay but needed some time to calm down. Besides these prescribed instructions, I expressed my empathy by

saying something like, “It is normal to feel sad”, and, “The situation must be very tough for you”.

Whereas crying was a rare situation, I was frequently exposed to emotions such as anger, annoyance, or discontentment linked to the critical incidents and expressed through research participants’ voice, facial expressions, and gestures. Goldman and Swayze (2012) provide a pertinent explanation which is that research participants might perceive there to be a benefit from self-analysis in the interview process and might treat the interview as psychotherapy. Because many research participants were so committed to telling their stories, I usually developed some sensitive feelings in those emotional moments. On the one hand, I sincerely appreciated the research participants’ honesty and trust. On the other hand, the more I put myself into the mood of appreciation, the more distress and sadness I took onto myself personally because of the stronger empathy developed with the research participants.

In order to manage my emotions derived from the interview, I maintained regular video meetings with my supervisors to talk about those sentimental stories about the research participants while I was in China. Furthermore, I tried to reduce the frequency of interviews so that I could maintain emotional equilibrium.

4.6.4 Ethical considerations

The study gained the approval (No.0000025842) of the Human Ethics Committee at Victoria University of Wellington. The research participants were fully informed regarding the purpose of this study and the use of data, research participants’ autonomy and rights, measures to protect confidentiality, and where to seek psychological intervention if needed. First, the information sheet (Appendix A), consent form (Appendix B), and interview questionnaire (Table 4.4 above) were sent to potential research participants before the interviews. Secondly, as it was anticipated that recruiting Chinese senior executives would rely on personal networks, a sentence - “Please DO NOT feel obligated to participate in this research due to any possible personal connection with the researcher” was included in the information sheet to avoid potential perceived coercion. Thirdly, to ensure their rights, participants were told they could withdraw from the study before 1/12/2018 by notifying me. This information was given in the information sheet. Fourthly, as recording and depicting stressful encounters can be

distressing for the research participants, procedures for managing potential emotional distress during and after the interviews were explained in the information sheet. For example, the research participants were asked whether they needed to take a break approximately every 20 minutes during an interview. If the research participants required psychological intervention, they could use the 24-hour free psychological counselling service provided by the Guangzhou Crisis and Intervention Center. Fifthly, the means by which confidentiality of research participants was protected by storing interview data in a password-protected computer and not disclosing any information that could reveal the identity of the research participants and their organisations was explained. The information sheet provides more detailed explanation about how this study strived to maintain a high standard of ethical conduct.

4.7 Data analysis

Researchers have called for transparent and detailed explanations of the procedure of qualitative data analysis (e.g. Nowell et al., 2017; Tuval-Mashiach, 2017). To this end, this section explains the data analysis process in detail. Firstly, it clarifies the unit of analysis. Next, it shows how trustworthiness is achieved through credibility, transferability, and dependability. Lastly, it explains the six phases of thematic analysis adopted in this study.

4.7.1 Unit of analysis

There is apparently no hard-and-fast answer to the question of what criteria should be applied in choosing the unit of analysis for CIT studies. According to Gremler (2004) who reviewed 141 CIT studies, most CIT studies use the critical incident as their units of analysis. However, Bott and Tourish (2016, p. 286) contest that "unless the goal of the research is to quantify a list of incident/events/situations, the incidents themselves should not be the unit of analysis". More specifically, Stitt-Gohdes et al. (2000) add that if the intent of research is to identify rather than quantify themes, research participants rather than incidents should be considered as unit of analysis. Despite these divergent perspectives, there are some general principles for determining unit of analysis. For example, unit of analysis should be dictated by research questions (Bryman, 2008) and it should be the focus of researchers' analytical attention (Chenail, 2012). As this study aims to explore work stressors faced by Chinese senior executives and how they utilise

resources to cope with their work stress, the objective of the research is to identify themes from the totality of narratives of each research participant. Therefore, each research participant rather than each critical incident is the unit of analysis. As a result, instead of the number of critical incidents, the number of research participants is included in reporting the themes of findings in subsequent chapters.

4.7.2 Trustworthiness

The quality of qualitative research is largely dependent on its trustworthiness evaluated through the criteria of credibility, dependability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness, as a related term to rigour (Morse, 2015a), is derived from a critical view of social research that says there can be more than one or several accounts of truth (Bryman, 2008). The criteria of validity, reliability, and generalisability that are traditionally used for assessing the rigour of quantitative research are replaced by credibility, dependability, and transferability (Morse, 2015a). In order to enhance trustworthiness, a number of initiatives were used in this study to meet the three criteria.

4.7.2.1 Credibility

Credibility is concerned with the match between research participants' accounts and the researchers' interpretation (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Triangulation that uses more than one source of data, research method, or investigator is commonly used to ensure credibility in qualitative research (Bryman, 2008; Patton, 2002). With reference to triangulation practice, I employed three main initiatives to achieve credibility. Firstly, multiple critical incidents reported by an individual participant allows me to check for the consistency of what people say about the same thing over time (Patton, 2002). A critical incident provides a unique context in which a theme is identified and multiple critical incidents with varying contexts help me determine whether the theme is valid within the total account from the research participant. Secondly, constant comparison across different research participants ensure identification of differences and variations (Gibbs, 2007). As will be explained below (section 4.7.3.2) in the phase two of the analytical process of categorising themes, each research participant's account was closely read and coded against a coding template. The template served as a point of comparison for discerning new codes as well as evaluating the credibility of the existing codes. Another technique of triangulation is debriefing (Ang, 2014), which helps in preventing bias and aids conceptual development (Morse, 2015a). Identified codes and themes with definitions

were checked by my supervisors and translated interview extracts were examined by another bilingual researcher.

4.7.2.2 Dependability

Dependability is concerned with whether other researchers could follow the decision trail taken in a study (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). In other words, it is associated with the feasibility of auditing (Bryman, 2008). Thus, research meeting the criterion of dependability should be logical, clearly documented, and traceable (Tobin & Begley, 2004). To this end, I developed a data analysis plan prior to data analysis and each major step of analysis was recorded. In addition, dependability depends on consistency (Korstjens & Moser, 2018) meaning that qualitative researchers should avoid the issue of “definitional drift” by constantly comparing codes (Gibbs, 2007). In this study, a systematic procedure of reviewing and defining codes and themes is explained in phase two, three, and four of the thematic analysis below. Also, qualitative research software – NVivo was used to ensure dependability as the software is efficient in helping store, retrieve, and compare interview accounts.

4.7.2.3 Transferability

Transferability deals with the question of applicability - whether findings generated from a context holds true in other contexts or participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A thick description of research setting, participants, and themes enables readers to judge the transferability of qualitative findings (Bryman, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Polit & Beck, 2010). Ang (2014, p. 222) explains that a thick description “creates statements that relate to the audience on how they feel they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described in a study”. In line with this idea, I strived to provide a good amount of contextual information when giving selected interview extracts. Also, demographic information such as gender, age, job titles, industries, and employee numbers were provided for readers to evaluate the transferability of research findings (Polit & Beck, 2010).

This section has discussed three critical dimensions of safeguarding trustworthiness and related measures. These dimensions and measures were demonstrated through the data analysis process. This is described in more detail below.

4.7.3 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is widely used as an analytical method to identify, analyse, and interpret important themes in relation to research questions (V. Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2016). It is particularly suitable for emergent researchers as it has the flexibility of accommodating different theoretical frameworks, research questions, and data collection methods (V. Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2016; Nowell et al., 2017). Additionally, it can highlight similarities and differences across a data set (V. Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the decision of adopting thematic analysis was based on the more accepted qualitative nature of CIT research nowadays. Historically, CIT studies could be grounded in either positivist or non-positivist paradigms (Chell, 1998). Content analysis has been widely used within the CIT studies (Gremmler, 2004), which is a quantitative method underpinned by the positivistic approach. As a data analysis method, content analysis stresses objective, systematic, and quantitative description of content (Bryman, 2008; Franzosi, 2008). Correspondently, an important step in content analysis is to count the frequency of words or phrases (V. Braun & Clarke, 2006) in order to transform qualitative data into quantitative data so that the ratio level of measurement can be used for statistical purposes (Bammidi Devi, 2019). However, Gremmler (2004, p. 79) points out the limitation of content analysis in CIT research by saying that “critical incidents are typically analysed with minimal contextualization and very little interpretation or explanation from the respondent”.

Instead, CIT has been increasingly considered as a qualitative approach within the phenomenological or interpretative paradigm (Butterfield et al., 2005; Chell, 2006). As a result, thematic analysis has been recommended as a more suitable method for analysing critical incidents (Bott & Tourish, 2016). Thematic analysis does not set out to quantify the importance of a theme but seeks understanding of the phenomenon from the insiders’ perspective. As thematic analysis primarily relies on a data-driven approach to code and analyse data (Bott & Tourish, 2016; V. Braun & Clarke, 2006), it logically resonates with the phenomenological stance embraced in this study so that the truth is seen through the lens of research participants. The thematic data analysis follows a six-phase model, developed in previous research (V. Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Table 4.5 summarises the six phases and corresponding steps for ensuring trustworthiness.

Table 4.5: Phases of thematic analysis adopted from V. Braun and Clarke (2006)

Analytical phases	Description of process	Relevant steps to ensure trustworthiness
1: Familiarising oneself with research data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transcribe all interviews verbatim by myself (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). • Write analytical notes to grasp preliminary thoughts (Saldana, 2013). • Re-read the transcript and notes to identify any omission of ideas (Gibbs, 2007; Patton, 2002). • Sort out usable critical incidents according to the pre-determined criteria. 	<p>Dependency could be enhanced through the consistency of analytical phases set up prior to data analysis (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).</p> <p>Credibility could be enhanced through re-examining thoughts in the process of reading transcripts and notes (Gibbs, 2007; Patton, 2002).</p>
2: Generating initial codes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up a coding structure in NVivo (Gibbs, 2007; Patton, 2002). • Generate a coding template from the data set of SOEs (Brooks & King, 2014; King, 2004). • Apply the coding template to POEs and MOEs groups (Brooks & King, 2014; King, 2004). 	<p>Credibility could be enhanced through examining the consistency of what the same research participant said over different critical incidents (Patton, 2002).</p> <p>Credibility could be enhanced through constant comparison across different research participants (Gibbs, 2007).</p>
3: Searching for themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collate all codes into potential themes by engaging with the literature (deductive) and engaging with the data (inductive) (Nowell et al., 2017). 	<p>Dependability could be enhanced through saving the old file after each major modification of theme structure (Nowell et al., 2017).</p>
4: Reviewing themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examine internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Patton, 2002). • Define each theme by writing down a couple of sentences (V. Braun & Clarke, 2006). 	<p>Dependability could be enhanced through defining codes (Gibbs, 2007)</p>
5: Naming themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give concise and punchy names to themes (V. Braun & Clarke, 2006). • Debrief themes to supervisors (King, 2004; Nowell et al., 2017). 	<p>Credibility could be enhanced through debriefing to supervisors (King, 2004; Nowell et al., 2017).</p>
6: Producing the report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present all themes in each category and then explaining sector-specific findings as a logical and coherent reporting structure (V. Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). • Provide thick description of examples and interview extracts to support arguments (Gibbs, 2007). 	<p>Transferability could be enhanced through thick descriptions (Bryman, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).</p> <p>Credibility could be enhanced through conducting translation check (Ang, 2014).</p>

4.7.3.1 Phase 1: Familiarising oneself with research data

The first phase requires researchers to get an overall sense of the depth and breadth of the content to stimulate analytical thoughts (V. Braun & Clarke, 2006). To do so, firstly, I transcribed all the interview recordings verbatim by myself (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Secondly, I wrote analytical notes along the way of transcribing, which helped in reflecting and recording some preliminary ideas (Saldana, 2013). Thirdly, I read the notes as well as the related transcript again to identify if there was any omission of thoughts and to examine the preliminary ideas by re-reading the transcripts (Gibbs, 2007; Patton, 2002).

Another important task was sorting out those useable critical incidents because not all critical incidents reported met the predetermined requirements regarding the critical incident format (see Table 4.3 in the data collection section). Each useable critical incident was stored in NVivo and labelled with a number as well as the research participant's pseudonym. The purpose of numbering critical incidents was for data management rather than seeing them as unit of analysis. As already explained in section 4.7.1, the unit of analysis for this study was research participant not critical incident.

4.7.3.2 Phase 2: Generating initial codes

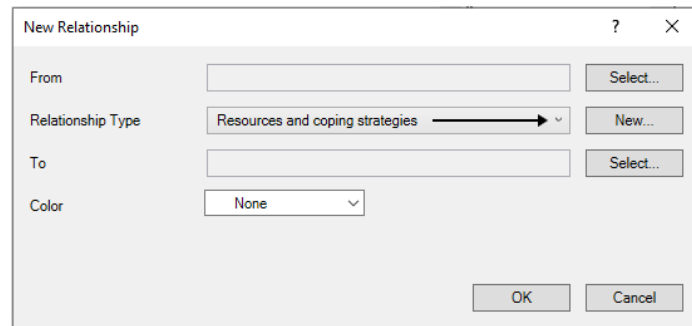
Generally, there are concept-driven and data-driven approaches to coding qualitative data (Gibbs, 2007). How researchers code their data depends on their research questions, research designs, and chosen theoretical lenses (Gibbs, 2007; Saldana, 2013). This study primarily adopted a data-driven approach, but a concept-driven approach was used to set up the coding structure and refine and name codes or themes.

Firstly, prior to coding, I employed a concept-driven approach to set up a general coding structure informed by the research questions and theoretical lens (Brooks & King, 2014). This study aims to explore work stressors and how coping resources are utilised for coping (i.e. the relationship between coping resources and coping strategies). Therefore, the coding structure consisted of three categories: work stressors, coping resources, and coping strategies. Interview transcripts of critical incidents were coded into these three categories using NVivo.

Because this study focuses on stressors and coping, in order to stay in focus when coding for each major area, the coding process entailed two readings of the same transcript. The

first reading sought to identify work stressors. The second reading focused on coping strategies and the involved coping resources. It is worth noting that as the second research question is interested in the relationship between coping resources and coping strategies, a function of NVivo called “Relationships” enabled me to create a link between a coping resource and a coping strategy (shown in Figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4: Creating a new relationship for coping resources and coping strategies



Because research participants recruited at the early stage of data collection were mainly from SOEs, I prioritised coding the SOEs’ interview transcripts. The other reason was to generate a coding template from the SOEs’ data set, which could be applied to coding the POEs’ and MOEs’ interview data. Brooks and King (2014) recommend that for coding interviews in a larger scale project, researchers select a subset of the transcripts to start with. Applying a coding template can help researchers stay focused on the most relevant themes while looking for new findings (Brooks & King, 2014; King, 2004). When there was an incompatibility of applying the coding template to the POEs’ and MOEs’ interview data, it alerted me to the need for modifying the existing template or adding new codes for the new content. As the same sector represents a relatively homogeneous context, coding by sector helped generate some recurring themes.

When coding the content of a transcript, I embraced an open coding or data-driven coding approach (Gibbs, 2007). This approach represents an inductive strategy of conceptualisation (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), which is more likely to avoid the imposition of pre-existing theories in interpreting data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Engaging with the literature in the early stage of thematic analysis “can narrow your analytical field of vision, leading you to focus on some aspects of the data at the expense of other potentially crucial aspects” (V. Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86). Data-driven coding is particularly important for investigating coping strategies since a contextual basis of

investigation is greatly needed in the field (Dewe, 2017; Dewe & Cooper, 2017; Dewe et al., 2010).

To commence the coding process, I read three SOE interview transcripts to produce some preliminary codes. In order to code consistently, I defined the codes in my own words. As I carried on the coding process, more codes were produced. In this process, I deliberately refrained from reading the literature to ensure an inductive, data-driven approach to coding. However, it is worth noting that concept-driven coding and data-driven coding should not be exclusively used (Gibbs, 2007) as the literature can help researchers pay attention to the subtle features of data (Tuckett, 2005). After I finished coding the data from SOE research participants, I reviewed the literature to examine the initial codes. The process helped improve the clarity of the initial codes through modifying their names and definitions. The product of this process was a coding template with definitions obtained from the SOE data set.

The coding template was then used to code the interview transcripts of the POE and MOE data sets respectively. Whenever there was new content that would not fit into the coding template, a new code was created. New codes were then examined by reviewing related contexts in transcripts as well as the literature to ensure that the codes were fine-grained.

4.7.3.3 Phase 3: Searching for themes

In phase three, I collated all codes into categories and themes. In this process, I attempted to find commonalities among the codes and reduce them into larger categories for a more concentrated analysis. A mix of inductive and deductive data analysis was employed at this stage in order to explore connections between the literature and the findings (Nowell et al., 2017). Therefore, a more interactive and flexible engagement with the literature was carried out. For example, interpersonal issues as a major work stressor is characterised by different types of conflict in the literature (Cooper et al., 2001). By reviewing the literature, I identified codes related to interpersonal conflicts. In this process, psychological contract breaches (financial and non-financial reasons), workplace bullying, and workplace violence were grouped under the theme of interpersonal issue. However, I also noted that a “high concern for others” (this code was changed to harmony-maintenance challenge at phase 5) appeared to be relevant to the interpersonal issue, although the work stress literature did not include this aspect. From an inductive

perspective, this code became part of the theme of interpersonal issue. As this was a dynamic and iterative process, before making major modification of the theme structure, I saved an old NVivo file in order to preserve the chance to re-examine the change if needed at a later stage. This is a way to ensure dependability emphasising traceable and clearly documented analysis process (Nowell et al., 2017).

4.7.3.4 Phase 4: Reviewing themes

Researchers suggest re-reading all the data extracts to examine whether the data that supports a theme is too diverse or too thin (V. Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Braun and Clarke (2006) state that reviewing themes involves two levels of inspection. Level one reviews the coded data extracts and level two examines individual themes in relation to the data set. In this regard, Patton (2002) suggests paying attention to internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. Internal homogeneity means that research data that holds a theme should represent a recurring regularity, while external heterogeneity concerns whether there is a bold and clear difference between themes. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), I wrote a couple of sentences to describe the content of each theme, which helped test whether themes were internally consistent and externally distinct. For example, regarding the level one of reviewing themes, there was a code called “Unexpected accidents with a potential significant impact on the company”. This code was created to describe urgent, unexpected accidents, causing significant loss to the company. However, when re-examining the coded data extracts, I found that there were two different causes of the accidents: subordinates and natural conditions (e.g. weather). As a result, the data extracts related to the cause by subordinates was regrouped into an existing code called “poor performing subordinate”, the data extracts related to natural conditions were under an independent code called “adverse natural conditions”. Regarding the level two of reviewing themes, under the main theme “performance uncertainty”, originally there were eight different codes. By reviewing them, they were broken down into two categories: organisational uncertainty factors and environmental uncertainty factors. These changes provide a more logical and coherent structure for data analysis.

4.7.3.5 Phase 5: Naming themes

Regarding naming the themes, Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 93) say that “names need to be concise, punchy, and immediately give the reader a sense of what the theme is about”.

Debriefing to my supervisors was carried out as a means to ensure the credibility of categorising and naming the themes (King, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). For example, there was a category of stressor called “high concern for others” under the theme “interpersonal issue”. My supervisors suggested that maintaining harmony seemed to be more pertinent and let me read relevant organisational studies of interpersonal harmony. This process proved to be very useful as there is a stream of literature discussing interpersonal harmony in organisations albeit that interpersonal harmony is yet to be considered as a stressor.

4.7.3.6 Phase 6: Producing the report

Reporting qualitative findings requires a logical, coherent, and convincing way of telling a story in relation to research questions (V. Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). It is important to present findings within a logical structure so that readers can make sense of the findings. Findings on work stressors are reported in the next chapter and then findings on coping as this sequence of reporting findings can provide readers with some contextual understanding of coping. Another important practice was to provide detailed pertinent examples of research participants’ extracts for supporting arguments (Gibbs, 2007). As interviews were conducted in either Mandarin or Cantonese and the research participants often used local colloquial language and sayings and culturally unique metaphors in their narratives, in order to preserve the authenticity of meaning as well as accuracy of the translation, I invited another Chinese-and-English bilingual scholar to check the translations. We subsequently met face-to-face to discuss translation issues to ensure the credibility of translations. One last note is that the thematic analysis was not conducted as a linear one-off process from the first to the last phase. Instead, it was done through a recursive process involving many times going back and forth across all the six phases (V. Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter outlines the study’s research philosophy, research design, CIT, sampling, data collection, and data analysis in detail. Based on the phenomenological philosophy, this study adopts an inductive research strategy by employing CIT for data collection and thematic analysis for data analysis. An important focus of the research design is to understand work stressors and coping strategies from the research participants’

perspective. Despite encountering some challenges of recruiting and interviewing Chinese senior executives, I obtained a rich data set and gained some valuable insights and experiences from the fieldwork. Drawing on the contextual narratives of critical incidents, I identified themes for answering the research questions by applying the six phases of thematic analysis. By following the suggestions of qualitative researchers, I also employed multiple measures to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

Chapter 5: Work Stressors

5.1 Introduction

The aim of this study was to understand the work stress that Chinese senior executives experience. As previously noted, work stress is conceptualised as a transactional process between the environment and the person, which is linked by the person's cognitive appraisal (Dewe & Cooper, 2017). The focus of this study is thus guided by cognitive appraisal theory encompassing two interrelated processes: primary appraisal and secondary appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). As previously stated, primary appraisal is an evaluation process in which the person detects "what is at stake" in terms of harm, threat or challenge resulting from some problematic antecedents, while secondary appraisal focuses on searching for coping options to address or minimise those undesirable conditions (Dewe et al., 2010). In order to understand work stress experiences, it is therefore necessary to first explore stressors to identify the antecedents to the primary appraisal. Thus, the first research question in this study asks: *What stressors do Chinese senior executives experience in their work environment?*

As the previous chapter notes, data was collected in the form of narratives of critical incidents. The data analysis process identified scenarios considered as "what is at stake" by research participants. From a theoretical point of view, stressors can be classified into different categories, including harm/loss, threat, or challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, this study found that often the research participants had a mixed evaluation of the situation. For example, a research participant Chaowei perceived a challenge as well as a threat in the event of embracing a self-initiated work goal. The mixed perspectives in appraisals of a single encounter has been identified in other research (e.g. Webster et al., 2011). Moreover, although the appraisal of stressful encounters can be labelled as harm, threat, or challenge according to the classification by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), in reality, appraisal outcomes can be more diverse (Aldwin, 2007). Especially, in adopting a qualitative approach where the investigation of appraisal is based on the research participants' interpretations, the participants can idiosyncratically construe their own meanings around the stressful events. Given these reasons, as long as the research participants indicated that the critical incident was significant, by describing some psychological strains such as feeling anxious, worried, challenged, struggling,

disappointed, angry, hurt or simply in a bad mood, the scenario was analysed to explore the relevant stressor inductively. From a phenomenological perspective, this approach is reasonable because research participants' own interpretation is of paramount importance in understanding the phenomenon under research.

An analysis of critical incidents identified four overarching themes of work stressors, including 1) performance uncertainty, 2) role conflicts, 3) interpersonal issues, and 4) desire for career success. This chapter will elaborate on each theme respectively. Figure 5.1 provides an overview of the findings in relation to work stressors, showing these four themes and also the categories and codes associated with each theme. The next sections discuss data and findings following the structure presented in Figure 5.1 on the next page.

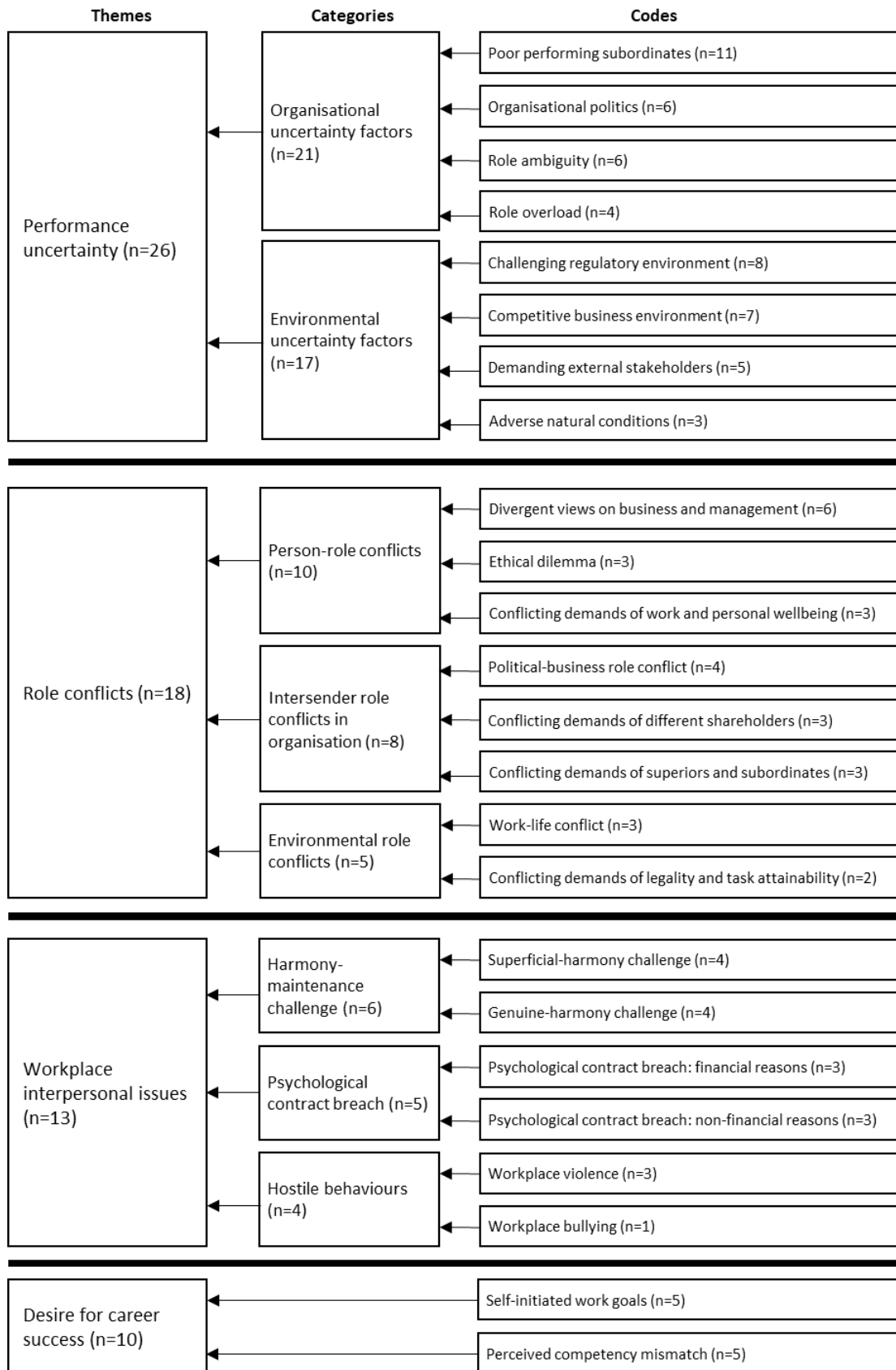
5.2 Performance uncertainty

Most research participants reported hurdles in the internal and external organisational environment undermining the attainability of desirable job performance, which can subsequently generate a low predictability of job performance, leading to high degree of uncertainty with regard to their ability to perform to desired levels. The concept performance uncertainty was coined to describe this theme.

The importance of job performance is underpinned by the structural characteristics of the senior executive job, utilitarian concerns, and a sense of responsibility. Job performance in this context means that the senior executives were not only responsible for the assigned individual tasks but also obligated to deal with emergent issues and assist subordinates in solving problems to maintain overall organisational performance, including performance related to its reputation and revenue. Therefore, job performance for senior executives entails both performance on individual tasks and the overall performance of the organisation itself. The importance of ensuring overall corporate performance was especially resonant for research participants (e.g. Chao, Wen, and Zitao) who are senior executives at the CEO level.¹⁰ They considered themselves to be the last resort for problem-solving. For example, Wen from an engineering and construction company faced a technical challenge reported by his project manager while building a tunnel

¹⁰ For protecting participants' identities, only a generic role title is given in reporting findings. CEO level encompasses both CEO and general manager.

Figure 5.1: The structure of work stressors for Chinese senior executives



through a mountain. He said:

“You’re ultimately accountable for all issues in the company. You have no other choice. Your deputy general manager, or functional manager can pass their problems to you, but you don’t have the option to hand it over to someone else, because eventually you will be accountable for the consequence”.

Besides the structural characteristics of the senior executive job, there were utilitarian concerns expressed by research participants. Some participants articulated the negative consequences of poor job performance, including a reduced personal bonus (e.g. Zhaowei, Xueyou, and Hujun) or demotion and dismissal (e.g. Xueyou, Hujun, and Wen) if assigned work goals were not met. It was also noted in Hujun’s account that causing a delay of state commissioned projects could be politically detrimental, affecting his career and the organisation’s reputation. Given these critical outcomes, any factor that might impinge on the attainment of job performance did pose a substantial threat to the research participants.

Utilitarian concerns are not the only reason why keeping up good job performance is important, as some research participants (e.g. Chao, Jianhua, Ronghao, Zitao, Lun, and Chang) also emphasised a sense of responsibility intrinsically demanding the carrying out of managerial duties. In this case, they saw the accountability for corporate performance as a virtue or moral obligation. For example, Zitao, the CEO-level senior executive of a property development enterprise, noted:

“As a member of the top management team and the leader of the team, you should take the responsibility and initiative. Whenever there is a challenge, you should lead the team to fight”.

Zitao articulated an overriding sense of duty without mentioning any extrinsic considerations such as rewards or punishments. Similarly, other research participants emphasised that responsibility or accountability is simply a moral obligation of responsibility rather than a utilitarian concern. For example:

“I don’t work to curry favour with somebody. I am responsible for everyone” (Shuqi).

“More stress stems from my personal responsibility. Since I undertook this task, it is me who should bear responsibility” (Jianhua).

“Since we’re accountable for this, first of all we must have commitment and responsibility” (Lun).

The above discussion highlights the structural job characteristics, utilitarian concerns, and a sense of responsibility that pressure senior executives to maintain and achieve job performance. However, these motives do not independently represent work stressors. The participants felt stressed when there were perceived obstacles to maintaining and achieving desirable performance outcomes. In general, performance uncertainty is the stressor capturing the relationship between performance demands and the obstacles in meeting the demands. The following sections 5.2.1 and 5.2.2 explain the organisational and environmental factors that produced performance uncertainty for the senior executives.

5.2.1 Organisational uncertainty factors

Participants revealed that job performance uncertainty could be caused by organisational factors, including poor performing subordinates, organisational politics, role ambiguity, and role overload. These factors resided within the organisation rather than in the external environment.

5.2.1.1 Poor performing subordinates

Perceptions of poor performing subordinates include a lack of attitude and competence of subordinates and their errors, and undermining research participants’ job performance. Chao provided an example regarding a chronic effect of subordinates’ poor performance. He was assigned to improve the economic performance of a subsidiary with a defined business target. However, the attainment of the target was perceived to be very challenging because of his perception of the staff’s incompetence. Chao elaborated on his stress:

“That was a 15 billion business target! That was exactly what I felt stressed about. . . . Because you just arrived here (in a subsidiary), and you were leading a team formed by others (the previous management). You

just landed as the leader here, but you didn't know much about the team. The statistics showed that this team was incapable".

While the situation of performance uncertainty in the above example was perceived by Chao to be chronic because it took time to achieve the business target, there were other emerging operational mistakes caused by subordinates and which demanded an immediate response as they could pose an immediate threat in terms of economic cost, reputation damage, or client loss. For example, Hui, a senior executive at the Deputy CEO level of a financial enterprise uncovered an incident in which his subordinate mistakenly sent a confidential agreement not yet signed by the client to an internal chat group. He explained his stress:

"A subordinate made a mistake. But you are his direct manager. His mistake would make a very negative impact on the corporate image and annual performance. . . . It just wasted all the effort. It could have a significant impact on the company's profit, say in the tens of millions RMB".

The above two examples show that senior executives are responsible for staff errors or their lack of competency. Poor performance on the part of subordinates in different sectors was attributed to different reasons. For the SOE research participants, they commented that they suffered from an organisational culture influenced by an ideology of socialistic egalitarianism, seniority, and guanxi. SOE employees were described by some research participants as being "slack", "passive", "unmotivated", and "incapable", as demonstrated by the following quotes:

"The idea of the 'big-pot' is entrenched. . . .¹¹ He (a subordinate with some managerial duties) is my assistant, I of course have a higher expectation of him, as compared with other employees. . . . However, he only sees himself as an ordinary employee. He is in fact less competent than others. The fact in China is that he has the seniority, but doesn't have the competency and motivation" (Liang).

¹¹ "Big-pot" or "eating from the same pot" is the Chinese idiom describing indiscriminate egalitarianism prevalent in the years before the reform and opening-up in China. The "big-pot" practice emphasises the equal distribution of wealth (Qin, 2007).

Similarly, Ming, a SOE senior executive, explained how guanxi acted as an obstacle in identifying talent. He explained:

“There is a lack of talented people. . . . Even though you have subordinates, basically they were recruited because of guanxi. Not very helpful. There are many reasons why the company is unable to recruit talented employees. As I just mentioned, guanxi is one reason. Another reason is that the compensation and benefits are not attractive enough” (Ming).

Likewise, Guanjie who is also a SOE senior executive described the lack of right attitude of staff in skill development.

“They are satisfied with the status quo, fettered by old conventions, and very passive. They don’t have the motivation to make progress” (Guanjie).

For POEs and MOEs, the reason for poor performing subordinates is quite the opposite. From the perspective of participants, POE and MOE subordinates made mistakes because they were too eager to make deals or work hard. However, it increased the risk of making mistakes. For example, in order to sell more products, a subordinate bypassed some risk prevention procedures.

“Because this colleague was relatively new to here, he just wanted to take more orders. Therefore, he was quite aggressive. He really wanted to do business with others, so he tried hard to make deals. He tried to satisfy the client in all possible ways” (Youjia).

5.2.1.2 Organisational politics

Some research participants reported that organisational politics is a source of their work stress as it undermines the desired job performance. Organisational politics is an umbrella term describing the systematic use of power and influence amongst organisational members or groups for the attainment of their personal and/or organisational goals (Lampaki & Papadakis, 2018). It can impair organisational performance because of its related self-interest, manipulation, and other subversive activities (Eldor, 2017). Organisational politics found amongst SOE and POE research participants was different. Within POEs, the issue of nepotism in family businesses was a recurring theme. For example, Xueyou, a senior executive at the Deputy CEO level of a property management

enterprise talked about his stress in terms of meeting the annual revenue target:

“Due to nepotism, it is very difficult to motivate people who are relatives (of the boss) to try their best. Or there might be a henchmen of the boss, making the workplace very political and segregated. People are passive, feeling that they won’t die even if the target is missed”.¹²

As for SOE research participants such as Guanjie and Hujun, they reported organisational politics in terms of inter-departmental collaboration. Guanjie said:

“It is mainly about the barrier between departments, which is a communication issue between departments. . . . Because of laziness, people don’t want to do too much work. They don’t have the pressure, because if I fail, they are not responsible for anything. The point is, I am responsible for this task. I bear the stress if there is any consequence”.

While Guanjie provided an example for the inter-departmental collaboration issue impairing his job performance, Hujun described the vertical political dynamic. Hujun was leading a very important project involving some cutting-edge technological innovation. There was a need for making a critical decision on a specification by the members in the project committee formed by the most powerful executives in the enterprise. The decision process was facilitated through consulting with some internal experts. However, the decision-making kept being postponed since the committee members and the internal experts were playing a political game. Hujun was responsible for implementing the project so he was stressed about the delay in progress. However, he felt powerless to influence the situation due to the fear of crossing the line of authority. He elaborated on the situation:

“Whatever the decision is, you (the committee) need to make a decision. You shouldn’t keep delaying. . . . Our experts are greatly influenced by the leaders. They are not independent enough. Especially, when they are not very certain, they tend to listen to leaders’ opinions. . . . In fact, many

¹² “Die” here is a literal translation, meaning get blamed or have other negative personal consequences.

leaders know this situation, but they are afraid of making a decision because they are reluctant to take the responsibility”.

The above examples show that senior executives and other organisational members are highly interdependent in completing some work tasks. If others do not cooperate as expected by the senior executives, the attainment of work goals can become uncertain.

5.2.1.3 Role ambiguity

Role ambiguity is well recognised as a work stressor (Cooper et al., 2001). Role ambiguity is a multidimensional concept mainly referring to three situations of lacking clarity in 1) work goals, 2) methods of achieving the work goals, and 3) the consequence of actions for the self, others, and the organisation (Jones-Carmack, 2019). It was only found within the incidents of some SOE and POE research participants. Interestingly, in most cases, the research participants knew what they were expected to achieve but felt uncertain about how to achieve the goals. For example, Ronghao, a senior executive at the Deputy CEO level of a private manufacturing enterprise, talked about his role ambiguity around a new strategy aiming to achieve a revenue target that was a prerequisite for initial public offering (IPO). In this case, Ronghao was certain about the long-term goal (IPO) as well as the intermediate goal (a revenue target), but he was not sure about the feasibility of his market strategy and was worried about the consequences if the strategy did not succeed. He elaborated on his stress:

“I have to ensure continuous profit growth. That is what I was anxious about. Since last year, I kept thinking, kept looking for direction. . . . Why did I feel so anxious and couldn’t fall into sleep last year? I felt so stressed because I was worried about whether my approach (a strategy of entering the residential market) would work or not. Even if it could increase our revenue, would it be sufficient to bring enough revenue (for the requirement for going public)? For a large company like us, it won’t allow change after the implementation (of the strategy)”.

Ronghao’s words signify a worry about the uncertainty of the practicality of his strategy. The consequence could be serious as the strategy proposed by him had involved a lot of organisational input for its implementation. His case seems to convey the nature of senior

executive jobs that work goals may be clearly given by the board or superiors but there may be a lack of instructions regarding how to achieve the goals and the executive bears the uncertain consequences. During the process from implementing the strategy to seeing outcomes, there is a degree of uncertainty from which work stress can emerge.

Although it is relatively less noticeable in this study, the dimension of lacking clarity in work goals was reported by Hong, a senior executive at the Deputy CEO level of a business service enterprise. She was commissioned by the chairman and the general manager to establish a new business unit. Nevertheless, after she proposed three different plans to the superiors, she did not receive any feedback from them for quite a long time. The feeling of uncertainty started germinating:

“At that moment, the reason I felt stressed was my doubt about whether or not it had any meaning for me to put in such a great effort. Did they really care about it? Were they reluctant to do it? Did they really support me to do that? Was this new business unit necessary at all? Shall I keep carrying on any work? I was quite anxious during that time”.

The above passage clearly shows an ambiguity about the superiors' attitude towards the work goal. However, in most cases reported by these research participants, they were more likely to encounter a lack of clarity in terms of how to achieve their goals and consequences of actions rather than work goals. Despite the different situations, both Ronghao and Hong mentioned how role ambiguity led to physical and psychological strains, including insomnia and anxiety.

5.2.1.4 Role overload

Role overload is defined as the excessive workload involved in performing different work roles for a limited period of time, which can create uncertainty about one's ability to perform well across all roles (Cooper et al., 2001). While role ambiguity is concerned with a particular challenging task, role overload emphasises the number of tasks. This stressor was reported by research participants across all three sectors. For example, Yifan described his overload in relation to establishing a new manufacturing division in another city:

“Because I am in charge of coordination with the government, and I am responsible for dealing with each government department, I barely have time during the day to do other tasks. I draft business proposals and future plans at night by myself. You can imagine my stress. That is huge amount of work. Sometimes, your boss asks for a solution, but you couldn’t figure it out immediately. Then you need to find time to come up with a solution, and need to discuss with other departments. At times, I have four or five meetings a day. Sometimes, I doubt whether I can cope with all of them well”.

Yifan’s case shows that he is engaging in different work roles such as a project coordinator, a strategic planner, and the boss’s assistant. The expectations of these different roles are not contradictory with each other but they can deprive Yifan of time. When time pressure is high while work tasks are varied and demanding, maintaining good performance at work can be difficult. Additionally, Liang gave an account of performance uncertainty related to a process of performance appraisal reform while he also assumed other roles in the organisation:

“The leader required us to submit a draft by September. But do you know that the appraisal reform would need years to adjust and optimise, which entails a lot of changes and complex data? The reform covers many areas. . . . We need to conduct a lot of simulations, calculations, matching, and so on. Feeling not sure about whether it will work or not. It is a huge challenge. I feel very stressed. . . . I also assume several different roles in the enterprise group, such as member of the disciplinary inspection committee, supervisory team, and so on. Sometimes I have three meetings at the same time in the morning, which makes it impossible for me to attend all”.

Liang revealed that his performance uncertainty was related to not only the workload of the reform itself but also to the burden of other work roles in the organisation.

5.2.2 Environmental uncertainty factors

Environmental uncertainty factors refer to external social and natural conditions that can affect a senior executive’s ability to perform. These conditions include a challenging

regulatory environment, a competitive business environment, demanding stakeholders, and adverse natural conditions.

5.2.2.1 Challenging regulatory environment

The nature of the regulatory environment in China characterised by its instability, rigidity, and slow regulatory change was found to be a factor contributing to senior executives' stress across all three sectors.

The instability of the regulatory environment is evident in the dramatic change of regulations in some industries, such as the health service, marketing, and insurance. A typical example was provided by Zhiling, a senior executive at the Assistant CEO level of a POE specialising in some emerging health services. Based on her interview account, before taking parental leave, she had assisted the company to expand enormously in a particular niche market. However, after she returned to work (about 6 months later), the enterprise was forced to retreat from the market due to new legislation. As a result, the company needed to make drastic redundancies (around 50% of staff), plan for new organisational restructuring, and deal with many public relations issues related to the change crisis. As the external regulatory environment was evolving strikingly fast, it caused insecurity and uncertainty for Zhiling. She explained her feelings:

“The big health industry is an industry influenced by policies immensely.

In the past two years, because of the change of policy orientation by the state, there have been some fluctuations in the industry. The industrial changes and adjustments are really significant, really frequent. . . . Very anxious, very anxious. I couldn't fall into sleep at night. It feels like *ru chi zai hou*.¹³ You don't know what will happen tomorrow”.

The second element ascribed to the challenging regulatory environment was the rigid enforcement of laws and regulations. This refers to situations where some government bureaus may fail to recognise the limitations in policy enforcement. For example, Hujun is the senior executive at the Deputy CEO level of a large SOE in the energy and utility industry. His team built a facility in an area that later became an environmental protection zone. From a legal perspective, upon completion of the project, the builder needed to

¹³ *Ru chi zai hou* is a Chinese metaphor describing the feeling of pain or discomfort just like having a fishbone stuck in your throat.

apply for an environmental certificate issued by the local environmental protection bureau. However, the application was declined because the facility had been built in the environmental protection area. Hujun contested the authority's decision with two arguments. Firstly, the project was carried out before the land was officially included in the protection area and the enterprise had all the required official permits before the construction. Secondly, demolishing the facility would cause real pollution while maintaining it would cause little or no harm to the environment. Nevertheless, the certificate was still not granted. Hujun explained his stress:

“I had followed all the legal procedures before breaking the ground for the project. That was not a protection zone. But now it is. . . . No matter how difficult it is to build something, I could always find the needed resources, such as machinery, to solve the problem. But something out of my control is the real headache for me. . . . You are constrained by others, so I am anxious”.

The above incident shows that the administrative environment is changing (i.e. establishing new environmental protection zone) but the enforcement of relevant regulations is ahistorical to the contextual constraint for compliance. Consequently, this regulatory rigidity had brought about performance uncertainty for Hujun, impacting on the stress he experienced.

The last dimension of the challenging regulatory environment can be seen in some problematic regulations that had not been amended for a long time since first promulgation. Lun provided a germane example regarding the difficulty of retaining a key professional whose qualification was a mandatory prerequisite for tendering in the construction industry. Although it was required by the law, there was no such need for the qualification in reality. The professional was hired merely for the sake of legal compliance. As a result, the professional seemed to feel dissatisfied with his career and decided to quit. This professional post had an overly high turnover rate as described by Lun. What made Lun feel stressed was the uncertainty of assuring a timely re-hiring of someone with the required qualification to fill the vacancy. The uncertainty was tied to the labour market and competition since there was a large scarcity of job candidates of this kind and rival companies were also competing for the need. He elaborated on his

stress:

“When the person (the professional) decided to quit, I started feeling anxious and thinking over what I could do about it; how could I hire another one? . . . To be honest, there has been an urge for changing this regulation that has required the qualification for many years but somehow there is still no action. The regulation was announced in 2007. Now it has been unchanged for 11 years. . . . Without this qualification, I am not allowed to bid lawfully”.

As Lun explained, the lack of regulatory change can cause work stress. This is because maintaining corporate performance is highly restricted by the problematic regulations that are not adaptive to the reality.

In short, elements of the changing regulatory environment (i.e. instability, rigidity, and lack of timely amendment) create unexpected disruptions, and the difficulty of legal compliance was identified by participants as causing work stress.

5.2.2.2 Competitive business environment

Participants from POEs and MOEs talked about the competitive business environment as contributing to their work stress, such as the difficulty of financing and fierce market competition in China. The competitive business environment as a result creates uncertainty for the research participants in terms of achieving their desired business goals. For example, Xueyou who is a senior executive at the Deputy CEO level of a property management enterprise depicted an unexpected result of bidding. That is, a reasonable bid estimated by the assessment department of Xueyou’s enterprise was 56 RMB.¹⁴ However, even though Xueyou put in a higher bid at 59 RMB, the deal was not secured because the rival company put in a much higher bid at 67 RMB. He interpreted his feeling:

“Nothing we could do about it because we believed that with this price (67 RMB put by the rival) it wouldn’t let us make any profit. The consequence was that we lost the deal. This is what I call stress. Now we face a lot of competitors and they have very strong financial capability”.

¹⁴ All the figures in this incident have been modified to ensure that the research participant cannot be identified. Yet, the magnitude of discrepancy between the prices can be reflected by the modified figures.

Junjie provided another account regarding the difficulty of sourcing finance because of the preferential treatment to SOEs by state banks. He talked about the need to prove his value in the first year of his incumbency. He secured a business project, but he had to relinquish it because he was unable to source finance from the banks. He explained:

“There is some policy-related preferential treatment in financing in favour of state-owned enterprises or central enterprises. . . . As a mixed ownership enterprise, it is very difficult for us to seek finance. . . . The cost of financing is very high. . . . I still remember that we lost a deal due to the lack of financial support. Really disappointed. . . . I needed to perform as I was new to the company. . . . Although there was a great opportunity in the market, it was quite difficult to source funds”.

Both Xueyou and Junjie have shown that the Chinese business environment is very competitive due to aggressive competitors and the unequal access to finance. Since these factors tend to be systemic and structural, the research participants have little control over the environment. Thus, it is challenging to maintain job performance.

5.2.2.3 Demanding external stakeholders

The third environmental factor influencing job performance is the demands that stakeholders, such as clients, contractors, “nail households”,¹⁵ and other related organisations or individuals, place on participants. These stakeholders may voice opposition, initiate tough negotiations, and even bring up unreasonable requests that can seriously stall work progress.

Both SOE and POE research participants mentioned their demanding stakeholders. For example, Han, a senior executive at the Deputy CEO level of engineering encountered a conflict with a contractor hired by a partnership company in a construction project. Near the end of the project, the partnership company had a financial issue so failed to make a timely payment to the contractor. Therefore, the contractor became suspicious about its project deposit held by the partnership company. The contractor demanded a written

¹⁵ Nail households mean homeowners who refuse compensation for relocation due to rapid urbanisation in China.

assurance for its deposit, otherwise they would not complete the project for Han. Han explained what has occurred to cause his stress:

“The client pushed us to finish the project as soon as possible and the contractor forced me to promise to pay back this one million (the project deposit) otherwise they wouldn’t complete the project. If I agreed, it would add an extra cost to my company”.

The construction industry was also facing difficulties in relocating residents and businesses. Hujun talked about his encounters regarding village people and a factory owner who resisted compensation and relocation. As for the village people, Hujun said:

“It is not a matter of money (compensation). Even though you pay them a great amount of money, he just doesn’t accept. Some people are more concerned about money, and some people just don’t want you to come here (to demolish their houses and relocate them). However, based on their right, it is totally reasonable for them to reject the offer”.

These examples show that senior executives had to deal with external stakeholders’ opposition, grievances, and sometimes tough negotiation. These problems are often unexpected, and they could slow down work progress. In this case, the pressure of performance uncertainty emerges.

5.2.2.4 *Adverse natural conditions*

While the regulatory and business environment and demanding stakeholders represent the social environment, performance uncertainty can also be related to the natural environment such as weather and geological conditions. These conditions seem to be common in certain industries, such as food supplies and construction. For example, Jianhua, a senior executive at the Assistant CEO level of a wholesale enterprise of food supplies, encountered a significant delay in cargo delivery by way of the waterways due to continuous heavy fog. He explained:

“We initially estimated that the time allowed for assembling and delivering should be sufficient, but because of the heavy fog and other bad weather conditions during shipping, the delivery was delayed by more

than half a month. . . . I oversaw this task. We needed to pay a great penalty for the delay”.

The unpredictable weather conditions played a key role in causing those unfavourable results. Also, Wen, a senior executive at the CEO level of an engineering and construction enterprise, encountered some technical difficulties likely causing a significant project delay when building a tunnel through a mountain in which some complicated geological conditions were found. In short, adverse natural conditions are objective environmental conditions, increasing the risk of performance uncertainty.

5.2.3 Summary

To summarise, performance uncertainty is a major work stressor for Chinese senior executives. Organisational and environmental factors threaten the predictability of job performance, such as meeting project deadlines and revenue targets. The data and analysis indicate that on the one hand, the predictability of job performance can be undermined by organisational hindrances, including poor performing subordinates, organisational politics, role ambiguity, and role overload. On the other hand, it can also be impacted by environmental hindrances, including a challenging regulatory environment, a competitive business environment, demanding stakeholders, and even adverse natural conditions. Given the fact that senior executives are not only responsible for their own performance but also that of the corporation, the wide scope of their responsibilities makes them susceptible to these organisational and environmental factors.

5.3 Role conflicts

Role conflict is another work stressor identified by over half of research participants. As indicated in Chapter 3, role conflict describes the incompatibility of role expectations in the workplace (Kahn et al., 1964). The research participants in this study experienced person-role conflict, inter-role conflict, and inter-sender role conflict (Cooper et al., 2001). Person-role conflict is the disparity between a senior executive's personal expectations and values and those espoused by the organisation or its key members (including shareholders, superiors, and colleagues). Inter-role conflict concerns the incompatible expectations in two or more different roles at times (e.g. being a husband and being a CEO). Inter-sender role conflict occurs when two or more incompatible expectations sent

by two or more role senders (e.g. being a general manager responsible to two different shareholders).

Amidst these three types of role conflicts, person-role conflict is distinguishable from the other two since it involves personal input by comparing self-expectations or values with the role's counterparts. By contrast, inter-role conflict and inter-sender role conflict are purely engendered by external role senders' expectations rather than by the self as a role sender. Because there are different types of role senders inside and outside of the organisation, for demonstrating the dynamics of self, organisational role senders, and environmental role senders, the discussion below is organised by these three domains: person-role conflicts, organisational role conflicts, environmental role conflicts.

Before outlining the role conflicts noted by participants, it is important to note that role conflicts are different from performance uncertainty factors in that, although role conflicts can affect job performance, the research participants tended to describe these conflicts as the direct source of stress. In participants' narratives, role conflicts paralyse or disorientate them in terms of properly responding to some situational dilemmas. As described by the research participants, they experienced various emotional strains, such as confusion, frustration, guilt, dissatisfaction, or powerlessness on that account. Empirical research has confirmed that although uncertainty can mediate the relationship between role conflicts and work stress, role conflicts have a significant direct effect on work stress (Tidd & Friedman, 2002). Therefore, role conflicts were categorised as a separate stressor in this study.

5.3.1 Person-role conflicts

A person-role conflict derives from a high input of personal thought in reformulating the requirements of job roles in a way that differs from the expectations of their organisations or significant others. It was reported by many research participants across all three sectors. The research participants encountered three different situations encapsulating person-role conflict: a different view on the matter of business and management, ethical dilemmas, and personal well-being.

First, some research participants revealed a strong opinion regarding how the business should be operated and managed, which was different from their organisations. For example, Ming, a senior executive at the Assistant CEO level of a SOE approached the

HR department to hire a desirable job candidate who had the appropriate professional background. Sadly, Ming's request was rejected because the person did not have *guanxi* with the government. Ming described his feeling:

“I had this feeling like I was struck by lightning when I was told (the rejection). . . . They (the HR department) have kind of stagnated. As long as they rely on *guanxi* with the government, the enterprise is only to serve the government. If so, how can we meet the market demand? . . . I think, perhaps I have a mindset different to the one of *danwei*”.¹⁶

Ming's incident relates to a human resource issue, but a deeper meaning conveyed is that he has a different perspective on how the enterprise should position itself in the market. That is, Ming's personal values conflicted with those of the organisation.

Another person-role conflict was captured in some ethical dilemmas within which there were ethical concerns with the job tasks commanded by superiors. For instance, Xiaoming, a senior executive at the Deputy CEO level of a property development enterprise, was assigned to purposefully run down a business over a few years.¹⁷ One of the main reasons was to reduce the cost of redundancy compensation in the future which was ethically contestable. As it was a secret only known by the top management team, Xiaoming felt that he was deceiving the employees. He explained:

“There were some unethical elements. That was, you knew what would happen in the future, but you avoided paying the compensation to the employees. You did something to keep them in the dark and let them (leave). . . . Sometimes I asked myself, was it right or wrong to do that? . . . It caused me some sort of confusion”.

Additionally, person-role conflict could hinge on a conflict between the need for personal well-being and job demands of the organisation. Xiaoming provided another critical

¹⁶ *Danwei* means the place of employment in China, which is often used to refer to a SOE or a government agency.

¹⁷ The land in which the business was located was to be used for a new property development in a few years. If the club was closed down now, the enterprise needed to pay a high tax every year for the unused land. In addition to this, slowly running down the business could lower the redundancy costs through the gradual voluntary departure of employees. Another reason was that slowly running down the business allowed the club to repurchase some residual memberships at a lower price as a way to avoid full refunds if the business was closed.

incident precisely illustrating this situation. He had been hospitalised for a month because of a serious illness. After he returned to work, he was unable to engage in many activities that were part of his routine work in the past. He explained his stress:

“Because after I was discharged from the hospital, I didn’t dare to drink wine, I couldn’t attend many business social engagements. I couldn’t do many things, such as going business trips and driving. . . . Later on, several bosses were kind of dissatisfied”.

The above case reveals the tension between the need for ensuring physical well-being and the high job demands required by the senior executive role. Meeting the expectations of one side can jeopardise the other, so the conflict is not easily reconciled.

5.3.2 Organisational role conflicts

The organisational domain contains many different role senders whose expectations can differ substantially at times. Therefore, individuals receiving these competing expectations can suffer from inter-sender role conflicts. The data analysis indicates three different types of inter-sender role conflict, including differing expectations between different shareholders, between political and business offices, and between superiors and employees.

5.3.2.1 Political-business role conflict

Inter-sender role conflict resulting from the competing demands of political and business offices was identified by several SOE and MOE research participants. Because it is mandatory to establish political offices of the CCP in enterprises involving state capital (J. Wang & Tan, 2020), the CCP offices are considered to be an integral part of the enterprises. Based on the interview data, party-building activities, such as political studies and other politically themed activities interrupted business activities, such as seeing clients and conducting normal office work. This difficulty not only manifests itself in coordinating others’ work but also in managing one’s own work schedule. The former scenario was evident by Zhaowei’s case. She was the senior executive at the Deputy CEO level as well as the party secretary of the CCP office. Whereas the party secretary role required her to arrange monthly political studies and other party-building activities within the company, she faced a great deal of pressure coming from her general manager. She explained:

“Because in accordance to the requirements of the party, we need to organise some political studies every month; the union needs to organise a birthday party for employees in each quarter. . . . He (the general manager) is more concerned about business performance, thinking that these activities are just cosmetic and unimportant. But I am in charge of this task (party-building), so I feel the stress. . . . The higher party office specifies these requirements. Their requirements must be met, but the general manager thinks that it is nonessential. That is contradictory.

While Zhaowei illustrated the challenge of coordinating others’ time for party-building activities, Hui who was a senior executive at the Deputy CEO level of a finance enterprise described his challenge of managing his own work schedule. He said:

“This high intensity of theory studies or personal reflection (politically-related) indeed takes up a significant amount of time that should be for managing business. But you know, you couldn’t show that you are upset. . . . At times, it does create a conflict with some important business schedules. . . . But it is an iron rule that you can’t break. There is no room for negotiation”.

Both Hui and Zhaowei’s words share an important message that political requirements appear to be an unquestionable priority possibly overriding some normal business activities at times. It is an important finding because so far, to my best knowledge, there is an absence of research on political demands in relation to work stress.

5.3.2.2 Conflict between different shareholders

Due to different shareholder interests, some research participants received contradictory requests from different shareholders accounting for the cause of inter-sender role conflict. Yangyang who worked in an MOE provided a useful example here. He encountered a disagreement between state shareholders on one hand and foreign shareholders on the other in a new investment in building a new plant. He said:

“It was about the cooperation with the foreign shareholder,¹⁸ our majority shareholder. We encountered a disagreement. The foreign shareholder is

¹⁸ For reasons of confidentiality, the nationality of the foreign shareholder is not given here.

prone to invest only when there has been a manufacturing order, whereas we think differently here in China. That is, you should have an investment (the plant) and then the client will consider placing an order”.

In order to balance the divergent interests between the state and foreign shareholders, Yangyang felt the pressure of figuring out a solution to resolve the conflict. Inter-sender role conflict was a stressful experience because it requires much cognitive capability and energy to search for that solution to accommodate different interests without trampling on the will or benefit of either side of shareholders.

5.3.2.3 Conflict between superiors and subordinates

Some research participants reported that their superiors and subordinates can have incongruent interests and expectations, in which case, they play an intermediary role in reconciling the conflicts. This scenario gives rise to this type of inter-sender role conflict, regardless of sectors. Xiaoming illustrated this stressor clearly. As mentioned previously, without telling the employees the true story, Xiaoming was required by the board to run down a business strategically. In this situation, the board did not want to attract too many new customers, while it was necessary to maintain a level of minimal operations. Therefore, Xiaoming had to cut down some marketing initiatives that had worked very well. Of course, the employees did not comprehend his decisions. Therefore, Xiaoming faced a lot of resistance from the employees:

“When they (the employees) saw some positive outcomes, when everyone knew that it was going to benefit the business, you had to stop those policies (marketing initiatives). It meant that you were cutting their income. . . . They objected to it very much. It was impossible for me to tell them why. I had to make up some excuses. . . . Very often, it felt like I was to be blamed either way. Neither the employees nor the shareholders were very satisfied”.

Xiaoming’s quote indicates the difficulty for him to manage the clash of expectations sent by the board and employees. It is expected because senior executives often perform a boundary spanning role through which to reconcile different interests of stakeholders.

5.3.3 Environmental role conflicts

Environmental role conflicts encompass conflicts between work and life, and conflicts between legality and task attainability. These two situations involve external stakeholder expectations which are in conflict with the job requirements.

5.3.3.1 *Conflicts between work and life*

Conflicts between work and life were mentioned in all three sectors by both female and male research participants. This is an inter-role conflict, meaning that the research participants struggled with meeting the demands of the job domain and the life domain (e.g. husband, parent, and close friend) simultaneously. This stressor is well illustrated by Xianqi, a senior executive at the COE level of a financial enterprise. Whilst his new-born was sick, his wife wanted them to take the child to the hospital together. However, he was swamped by a very important meeting. He described his stress in this way:

“I felt that I gave 100% or even 120% of my time to the company but only gave -20% to my family. Devotion to my job to this extent has created some negative impact on my relationship with my wife, and the family. . . . I felt the conflict inside my heart. I really felt that I should spend more time looking after the family, but it’s impossible because the meeting could not be held without me. . . . Feeling guilty. I was in a bad mood”.

Being senior executive of a financial enterprise, Xianqi should be relatively well paid and be able to hire someone who could assist his wife. Yet, the husband role providing emotional support to the wife probably cannot be fulfilled by other people. The role conflict between work and family was a salient stressor for Xianqi as there seemed to be no better solution: he had to either sacrifice the wife’s need or not attend the meeting. His words clearly show his distress in not being able to balance his work and life.

5.3.3.2 *Conflicts between legality and task attainability*

Research participants noted conflicts between legality and task attainability – referring to the situation where a task requirement set up by a client is incompatible with legal requirement. This is an inter-sender role conflict since the client and the organisation demand different priorities. This stressor was reported by Hujun and Ming who both worked for SOEs in which government-commissioned projects were the main source of

business. However, the government clients tended to play a dominant role in setting project specifications, such as project deadlines and requirements for bidders, without fully considering the constraint of rules and regulations. For example, Hujun, a senior executive at the Deputy CEO level of an energy and utility enterprise was commissioned to build an infrastructure within a very tight timeline. However, getting administrative approvals from relevant government bodies was very time consuming. He explained:

“According to the rule, we should not commence any construction work before we obtain the land approval. But the project timeline was very tight. You must get it done within two years. . . . If I must comply with the rule, then the project deadline couldn’t be met. It was the most annoying problem. That was the conflict between the project deadline and legality”.

Similarly, Ming’s enterprise encountered a dispute with a bidder during the process of a government tender. Regarding how the dispute should be handled, there were two divergent opinions between the government client and the enterprise. He said:

“The danwei required that every step (for dealing with the dispute) should be legally sound. However, the government was very aggressive, very aggressive. . . . I faced a lot of stress. I not only faced the government but also danwei. I was under stress coming from both sides”.

Both Hujun and Ming’s cases illustrate that some government agencies lack thorough consideration of legal compliance when setting up project specifications for SOEs. It is an intriguing finding as the government clients in both cases seemed to overlook the regulatory context when imposing a demand on businesses. This stressor is possibly contingent on the transitional economy in which legal aspects still need improvement.

5.3.4 Summary

In summary, this analysis shows that Chinese senior executives face role expectations inside and outside of their organisations. For some, there was a clash in terms of expectations and values between their personal selves and their work role. Also, there were some incompatible expectations within the organisational domain such as conflicting shareholder interests, competing demands between political and business imperatives, and disagreements between superiors and subordinates. Lastly, expectations

from the external sphere such as family, friends, and government agencies can impose challenges in performing their roles required by the organisation. Role conflict is a salient stressor since it requires significant psychological and physical resources to reconcile conflicting interests.

5.4 Workplace interpersonal issues

The third major stressor that emerged from the data analysis is workplace interpersonal issues, which encompass three categories: 1) harmony-maintenance challenges, 2) breach of psychological contract, and 3) hostile behaviours. While workplace interpersonal issues are usually concerned with those actual, negative events such as overt arguments, abrasive leadership behaviours, bullying, harassment, and physical violence (Guidroz et al., 2012; Kessler et al., 2013; Stoetzer et al., 2009), this study has discovered a new form of workplace interpersonal issue, that is, harmony-maintenance challenges. This stressor represents a future-orientated and more hidden issue of interpersonal relationships.

5.4.1 Harmony-maintenance challenges

Harmony-maintenance challenges refer to situations where research participants wanted to preserve interpersonal harmony, but certain job scenarios prevented them from doing that. Harmony-maintenance challenges consist of two subthemes. The first is called a superficial-harmony challenge, meaning that the research participant perceived the difficulty of avoiding interpersonal conflicts that have yet to happen. In a sense, this stressor derived from a worry of others' negative responses to a decision made by the research participant as a senior executive. Liang provided an example of being appointed to the leadership role in an organisation-wide employee performance appraisal reform. Liang interpreted his stress vividly with some local metaphors:

“Because it (the reform) affects everyone’s wallet,¹⁹ impinging on everyone’s fundamental benefits . . . , it involves too many people’s interests. In the end, you may be drowned by people’s saliva. . . .²⁰ There are two potential outcomes. One is that the reform is very successful, and you earn a lot of credit. The other situation is that you are blamed by

¹⁹ Wallet is a metaphor for income. In this context, the reform may reduce the income of some people.

²⁰ Saliva is a metaphor for criticism and blame. The quote means that the research participant might feel overwhelmed by people’s criticism and blame.

everyone (if the reform fails). You don't get any benefit but make yourself very stinky".²¹

Liang's quote conveys a fear of damaging his interpersonal relationships in the enterprise if many organisational members are unsatisfied by the reform. A superficial-harmony challenge is not an interpersonal conflict because no conflict with others has happened at that point.

The other stressor is the genuine-harmony challenge, referring to the situation where some research participants have a sincere concern over subordinates' well-being but it is very challenging under some circumstances (L.-L. Huang, 2016). In comparison with the superficial-harmony challenge, the genuine-harmony challenge is driven by humanity and benevolence, seeing interpersonal relationships in a positive light. For example, Yangyang, a senior executive at the Deputy CEO level of a large manufacturing enterprise negotiated an important deal with high stakes for employees' income in the next few years. In talking about his work stress, Yangyang emphasised his obligation to protect the employees. He made a sentimental comment:

"Due to the policy of leadership rotation, I may not be working in this enterprise in the next few years. If I don't get the deal, it wouldn't affect me too much, but I am thinking about the future development of the enterprise. So many 'brothers' are following you to make a career here. You are not thinking of yourself first, but rather the *jiti* and the employees".²²

Yangyang's quote demonstrates the importance of collectivism signalled by the term *jiti*, in which group interest is appraised as being more important than self-interest. Although it is a job duty for Yangyang to win the deal, his words emphasise his relationship with employees and their careers. While Liang's case indicates an aversity to interpersonal conflicts, Yangyang's case reveals a positive, genuine desire to take care of others. Both Liang and Yangyang revealed the importance of interpersonal harmony in their

²¹ Being stinky is a metaphor meaning that the person receives a lot of criticism and hatred from others.

²² Jiti refers a group of people of various sizes, such as people in a class, a company, or a wider community. Jiti also connotes the meaning of collectivism as *jiti zhuyi* together means collectivism with *zhuyi* meaning doctrine.

workplaces.

Although the notion of harmony plays an important role in shaping behaviours in the Chinese workplace (Chin, 2015), interestingly, harmony-maintenance challenges were only identified amongst SOE and MOE research participants. This is probably influenced by the practice of two-way performance appraisal more common within SOEs and MOEs (e.g. Liang, Guanjie, and Lun). The two-way performance appraisal means that subordinates are entitled to rate and comment on their superiors, usually once a year. Thus, this institutional constraint may produce an organisational atmosphere in which harmonious interpersonal relationships are of great importance.

5.4.2 Psychological contract breach

A psychological contract can be loosely defined as the unwritten set of expectations perceived by employees through social exchange with their employers. A psychological contract breach takes place when the perceived obligations of the employer are not fulfilled, while the employees have invested their energy, time, or other resources into their work (Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011). Several research participants regardless of sectors demonstrated that breaches of their psychological contract damaged the relationships with their superiors.

Psychological contract breaches identified in this study covered various aspects, such as failing to provide recognition, monetary rewards, or support, whereas dissatisfaction about monetary rewards was most commonly mentioned (e.g. Ming, Qikun, and Ziqi). Monetary rewards such as bonuses and salary increments were rather arbitrary. For instance, there seemed to be a lack of formal human resource practices in performance incentives and remuneration review. Instead, a psychological contract was the alternative, mainly shaped by superiors' verbal statements or just a common sense expectation. For example, Qikun, a senior executive at the Assistant CEO level of a marketing enterprise, acquired a business deal contributing one million revenue to the enterprise,²³ which was beyond his job responsibility. According to the boss's oral promise in the past, Qikun should have been rewarded with a bonus of half million (50%). However, the boss went

²³ All the figures such as the amount of the deals and rewards in this incident have been modified to ensure that the research participant cannot be identified. Yet, the magnitude of discrepancy between expected reward and actual reward is reflected by the modified figures at an equivalent rate.

back on his word, making Qikun so disappointed and angry. He elaborated on his feeling:

“The company I work for is a start-up enterprise, so the policies are not fully established yet. . . . He (the boss) verbally mentioned that the commission would be 50% of sales revenue. For instance, if you earn a one-million deal for the company, the company can give 0.5 million back to you in compensation before tax. . . . In fact, he (the boss) was only willing to offer me 20% (of the revenue), so it was far from my expectation. In this situation, I felt hugely disappointed”.

Qikun’s narrative indicates a violation of the psychological contract regarding financial reward. It was perceived as a stressor to Qikun since 30% less in the bonus was obviously a significant loss and there was no formal contractual agreement that enabled him to challenge the boss legally.

In fact, psychological contract breaches can be caused by other reasons beyond financial terms. For example, Feng, a senior executive at the Deputy CEO level from the media and culture industry, explicated his distress at becoming the scapegoat for his superior. Based on Feng’s narrative, the superior intervened in the process of recruiting a vendor who had guanxi with the superior. Later on, the vendor had a product quality problem and the enterprise was entangled in the legal dispute. However, the superior shook off his responsibility completely. Feng’s narrative was imbued with grief and disillusionment regarding his trust in the superior:

“It was unfair. . . . I didn’t have any evidence to prove that I was not involved in this incident. He just verbally mentioned to me about his intention (recruiting the merchant). But he directly commanded my subordinates to do it and only let me know afterwards. . . . Because I trusted in him, I never expected that when there was a problem, he wouldn’t take any responsibility. Instead, he shirked the responsibility and shifted the blame onto his subordinates”.

Similar to Qikun, Feng’s incident demonstrates that over-reliance on a psychological contract can put the person at risk if a serious problem arises, because there is no contractual agreement of duties. In both cases, a psychological contract breach led to the

appraisal of unfairness and a loss of confidence in maintaining positive interpersonal relationships with superiors in the future (Branch & Murray, 2015; Clinton & Guest, 2014). Since positive interpersonal interactions with superiors are an important resource for career advancement (Wei et al., 2010) and obtaining social support at work (Thacker & Stoner, 2012), breaches of psychological contract could generate an impression of resource depletion that is an important cause of stress (Hobfoll, 1989).

5.4.3 Hostile behaviours

Workplace bullying and violence are different types of unreasonable, hostile behaviours at work. Although lacking a universally accepted definition, workplace bullying can be defined as any repeated or enduring aggressive behaviours due to a power imbalance in the work environment (Zapf & Gross, 2001). Workplace violence is used in this study to refer to those single episodes of the intentional use of physical force or threat not necessarily linked to the power imbalance (Einarsen, 2000; T. Xu et al., 2019). Workplace bullying and violence have been identified as serious work stressors, with various harmful effects on individual well-being, such as lower self-esteem, panic attacks, guilt and shame for not daring to defend, increased anxiety, depression, and even suicide (Branch & Murray, 2015).

Workplace bullying was identified by Jiaxin, a senior executive at the Deputy CEO level of an MOE. Yuqi has a similar managerial rank, and was also the wife of the Chairman who owned the majority of company shares. For this reason, Yuqi was very influential and dominant in the workplace. Whilst a team of executives were visiting a museum in France, Yuqi asked what the sculptures were and Jiaxin replied that they were the characters from Greek mythology. Perhaps Jiaxin's response made Yuqi lose face. Yuqi was furious and said: "It is nonsense, we are in France, not Greece!" A colleague told Jiaxin quietly to refrain herself from being knowledgeable in front of Yuqi. Jiaxin felt very upset during the entire overseas trip since she had on several occasions encountered verbal assaults and suppression instigated by Yuqi. Jiaxin explained her distress:

"I felt really hurt at that moment. Why am I here to suffer this humiliation for the sake of such a salary! Because she pays me a relatively high salary. The salary is very high. I need to raise my family and use this salary to pay my home loan and car loan. . . . If I

did not tolerate (Yuqi), if you argued with her, she could dismiss you tomorrow”.

Jiixin’s case reveals a power imbalance between Yuqi and herself. On that account, the stress of Yuqi being associated with workplace bullying is probably because of a perceived inability to fight back and the potential job insecurity of doing so.

Instances of workplace violence were also noted. Chao relayed an example where he was illegally detained by a client. He was the senior executive at the CEO level of a large engineering and construction enterprise. At the client’s invitation, Chao went to another city for a business dinner and then discussion of some major specification changes in a construction project. After the business dinner, the client requested that Chao sign an agreement onsite immediately. Because Chao needed an internal procedure for approving the agreement, he refused to do so. Tension escalated and the client threatened him by not letting him leave. He explicated the scene with more details:

“You needed to ensure personal safety because you had brought some colleagues with you. Also, you were not representing yourself. You were representing the enterprise. . . . Because the situation was full of danger, I decided to leave. After I went down (to the ground floor), they locked the front door immediately. Completely locked”!

Another research participant Han who had also experienced workplace violence is also a job holder in the construction industry. The literature shows that workplace violence is related to certain high risk industries or occupations, such as construction project managers (F. Yang et al., 2017), nurses (Oh et al., 2016), prison officers, and psychiatrist (Rasmussen et al., 2013) that have a high exposure to violent hazards. However, it is somewhat unexpected to see that senior executives who possess more authority and higher social status are also exposed to workplace violence.

5.4.4 Summary

To sum, interpersonal stressors, including harmony-maintenance challenges, psychological contract breaches, and hostile behaviours, influence Chinese senior executives’ work stress. The harmony-maintenance challenges convey an aversity or sensitivity towards job tasks that may jeopardise others’ well-being. A heightened caution

of the impact of behaviours on others can spark psychological tension when being responsible for those high-stakes managerial tasks. Furthermore, psychological contract breaches signify damage to the interpersonal relationship with superiors due to the informal obligations of the superiors not being honoured. Lastly, some research participants are not insulated from workplace bullying and violence due to the power imbalance between colleagues and the violent culture of the construction industry.

5.5 Desire for career success

Career success is a multidimensional construct that can be broadly divided into objective and subjective career success (Shockley et al., 2016). While objective career success is related to tangible achievements such as salary, promotion, and status, subjective career success is underpinned by a personal evaluation of aspects being important to the individual's career experience such as job satisfaction, pride in achievement, sense of identity, self-worth, and even fulfilling relationships (Arthur et al., 2005; Q. Gu & Su, 2016). This section explains two distinctive mechanisms as to how desire for career success can contribute to work stress.

First, data analysis reveals that craving career success could create challenging self-initiated work goals, which subsequently increased workload and responsibilities for some research participants. Although these self-initiated work goals might not be incompatible with organisational goals such as more revenue and fame, due to the constraint of organisational resources and politics, the participants were not equated with sufficient resources and sometimes encounter resistance and discontent. The other career-related stressor is that some research participants perceived a mismatch of their competency and job requirements. In this situation, they increased efforts to reduce potential mistakes, or they experienced self-criticism and grief if they failed to achieve the work goal required by the organisation.

5.5.1 Self-initiated work goals

Some research participants in this study expressed a strong desire for both subjective and objective career success, such as fulfilling a meaningful life, personal growth, recognition, long-term job security, and financial rewards. For example, Chaowei who was a senior executive at the Chief Functional Officer level, serving in a large media and culture enterprise at a late career stage, was torn by a difficult decision needing to be made. Since

a business outsourced to a third-party company was being operated dreadfully, the enterprise group in which Chao worked intended to relinquish the business. However, Chaowei was keen on keeping it alive and was considering taking over the management of the business. However, it was an arduous challenge for Chaowei because his superiors had explicitly told him that except for preserving the license of the business, the enterprise group was unable to provide other resources, including finance and human resources. Despite these constraints, Chaowei decided to give it a try. He explained:

“Personally speaking, it would be a shame (if the business was relinquished). There have been some successful cases. This industry is flourishing. It will be a shame if I don’t try. . . . From the bottom of my heart, if I give up, I will regret it. . . . As a senior media professional, I don’t want to feel sorry about myself. I want to prove my ability and value. Otherwise, you will retire in a few years without doing many meaningful things. That is equal to wasting your life. In the future, you will taste the disappointment. You gave up or missed out so many opportunities. You didn’t live your life to the fullest. You will blame yourself”.

Chaowei’s words reflect a strong motive for subjective career success in terms of making his life worthy by embracing a self-initiated challenge in his late career. However, Bolino et al. (2010) note that people working proactively may easily draw themselves into the danger of intensified workload and responsibilities. It was true for Chaowei too, since he needed to search for external capital investment through his personal social networks, because there would be very limited support given by his organisation as previously mentioned.

Another example regarding work stress induced by self-initiated work goals was provided by Ziqi, a senior executive at the Assistant CEO level of a private-owned marketing enterprise. Ziqi encouraged the chairman to list the enterprise in spite of the Chairman’s hesitation and other shareholders’ resistance. In the process of pushing for IPO, Ziqi was aware that rumours about her private relationship with the chairman were being spread by other shareholders. Ziqi elaborated on her rationale for pursuing this work goal.

“What makes the greatest achievement in my life, I think, will be the achievement of getting the company listed. . . . But he (the Chairman) was not very determined. I have been giving him a lot of confidence to try since I was here. At the beginning, he was reluctant because IPO would involve extra cost, saying millions or more than ten millions. . . . If you succeed in helping the company get listed, your value, recognition in the industry will be totally different. . . . At least, I will have great reputation in the industry, that is, I have done something great. If one day I leave this company, I could easily find another job. . . . If the company is listed, I will be entitled to purchase the initial shares at a very low price”.

Ziqi has provided a nuanced explanation of her self-initiated work goal of pushing for IPO. Her motive in doing this does not merely hinge on the aspiration for subjective career success (i.e. pride in achievement) but also on objective career success (i.e. long-term job security and the cheap purchase of company shares). Yet, she commented on the stress related to interpersonal tension resulting from her pursuit:

“During the process (of preparing the company for listing), many other shareholders thought that I was having an affair with the boss. Why insist on a dream of listing the company? . . . If the attempt failed, several millions of investment money would be wasted. These shareholders only considered their own interest, that was, they didn’t want to spend this money because it would otherwise be their dividend”.

Despite the challenge of pursuing self-initiated work goals, the research participants generally embraced a positive attitude. Di’s words demonstrate it:

“My superior didn’t expect too much, but I just wanted to make some breakthrough for myself. . . . Often, we (senior executives) give stress to ourselves. We find new things to do. You set up some expectations of your own. You can only progress by giving more stress to yourself”.

In short, self-initiated work goals are personally meaningful but can also proactively forge a hostile situation in which the individual needs to withstand many environmental challenges such as workload, responsibilities, and interpersonal conflicts if the individual wants to succeed.

5.5.2 Perceived competency mismatch

The other career-related stressor identified in this research is perceived competency mismatch, defined here as a perceived gap between personal competencies and requirements of the current job (P. Yang & Yang, 2019). A sense of incompetence could develop after an actual job failure. For example, Dehua had a very high expectation of winning a tender because it would give him a lot of credit for the future promotion. He said:

This is a very important opportunity for me to prove myself. . . . Lay a foundation for my career here. I am very likely to be promoted to the position of general manager. Being the general manager means that you have a lot of power and you can decide on many things. Basically, you would be obsessed with such power”.

However, Dehua failed in the tender, which traumatised him to a large extent. The amount of aspiration for success might create the equivalent amount of disappointment. A long time after the tender had failed, Dehua was still trapped in a depressive mood and constant self-criticism. The following passage illustrates his emotional distress:

“It was very smooth at the early stage (of the tendering process). I felt I worked really hard, but somehow it failed. . . . On the way back, I felt so disappointed. I couldn’t accept it. I felt very upset for quite a long time after that. . . . The boss didn’t blame me or express discontent in any form. . . . But I thought, you were a professional executive, was there something that you haven’t done well enough? Or was there something you could have done better, but you didn’t?”.

As shown by the quote above, Dehua was devoted to the tender, and the boss did not condemn or blame him on that account. However, his perceived incompetence became very self-sabotaging.

According to T. W. H. Ng and Feldman (2014), a perceived competency mismatch occurs after making a comparison with others. For example, Qikun conducted fieldwork research on project investments with a schoolmate. He became very anxious about his professional capability after the fieldwork as he noted that he was far less knowledgeable than his peer who used to be his schoolmate. He explained his stress:

“It shocked me! I found that there was a huge gap in industry knowledge and insights between us. I didn’t expect that. It was overwhelming. . . . I was very anxious and disoriented during that time. . . . Regarding the level of professionalism, I guess I was at level three while he was already at level seven. . . . It felt like everyone was running. Suddenly, someone has run to the point of 300 meters, whereas I was still running very slowly, 150 meters behind. . . . During that time, I had a lot of self-doubt”.

Qikun’s words vividly demonstrate anxiety because of a perceived lack of professional competency that came to the fore when comparing himself with his peer. This self-defined failure also drew Qikun into the vortex of self-criticism or self-doubt, just like Dehua.

Another situation instigating a sense of incompetence was caused by self-comparison between the current promoted job and the previous job. For example, a newly promoted senior executive at the Deputy CEO level, Feifei, described the process of organising a nation-wide industry forum. She commented on her stress in relation to the fear of potential mistakes or failures:

“During that time, I experienced panic, so afraid of making mistakes. I felt uncertain about everything. . . . I had a self-doubt. I was afraid of being seen by others as incompetent. I really wanted to show everyone that I could do that through this event (organising the forum)”.

Feifei’s case shows that the desire for career success can cultivate a strong impetus to do the job perfectly. Any indication of failure can provoke a drastic response to curb the situation. Nevertheless, it can exhaust the person’s energy and serenity impacting physical and psychological well-being. Feifei said that the work had caused her some

symptoms of burnout such as depressive mood and losing interest in anything after the forum had finished. Although any other external forces such as job duty cannot be discounted as a source of stress, Feifei's account underscores the significance of personal desire for career success as a main driver of her work stress.

5.5.3 Summary

This section has outlined two important mechanisms of desire for career success as a work stressor. Self-initiated work goals can generate demands, such as workload, responsibilities, and interpersonal tension, while perceived competency mismatch can play a role in affecting senior executives' well-being after an actual failure or over a period of engaging in a challenging job task.

5.6 Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter identifies work stressors faced by Chinese senior executives. The analysis reveals four main stressors, including performance uncertainty, role conflicts, workplace interpersonal issues, and desire for career success. First, performance uncertainty caused by organisational and environmental uncertainty factors was seen to be a direct cause of work stress. Secondly, the Chinese senior executives appeared to suffer from many conventional role conflicts identified in the literature, whereas SOE and MOE Chinese senior executives were exposed to a peculiar stressor which I have named "political-business role conflict". In addition, workplace interpersonal issues identified show that conflict was not the only facet of interpersonal stress. Instead, the challenge of maintaining interpersonal harmony was a different approach to understanding stress resulting from workplace interpersonal actions. Lastly, the desire for career success as a work stressor identified in this study had two components. While some Chinese senior executives voluntarily took on extra challenging work goals to craft their careers, others were struggling to fulfil their prescribed tasks. Theoretical implications of these findings will be discussed in Chapter 7. Before that however, Chapter 6 will report findings on coping.

Chapter 6: Coping Strategies

6.1 Introduction

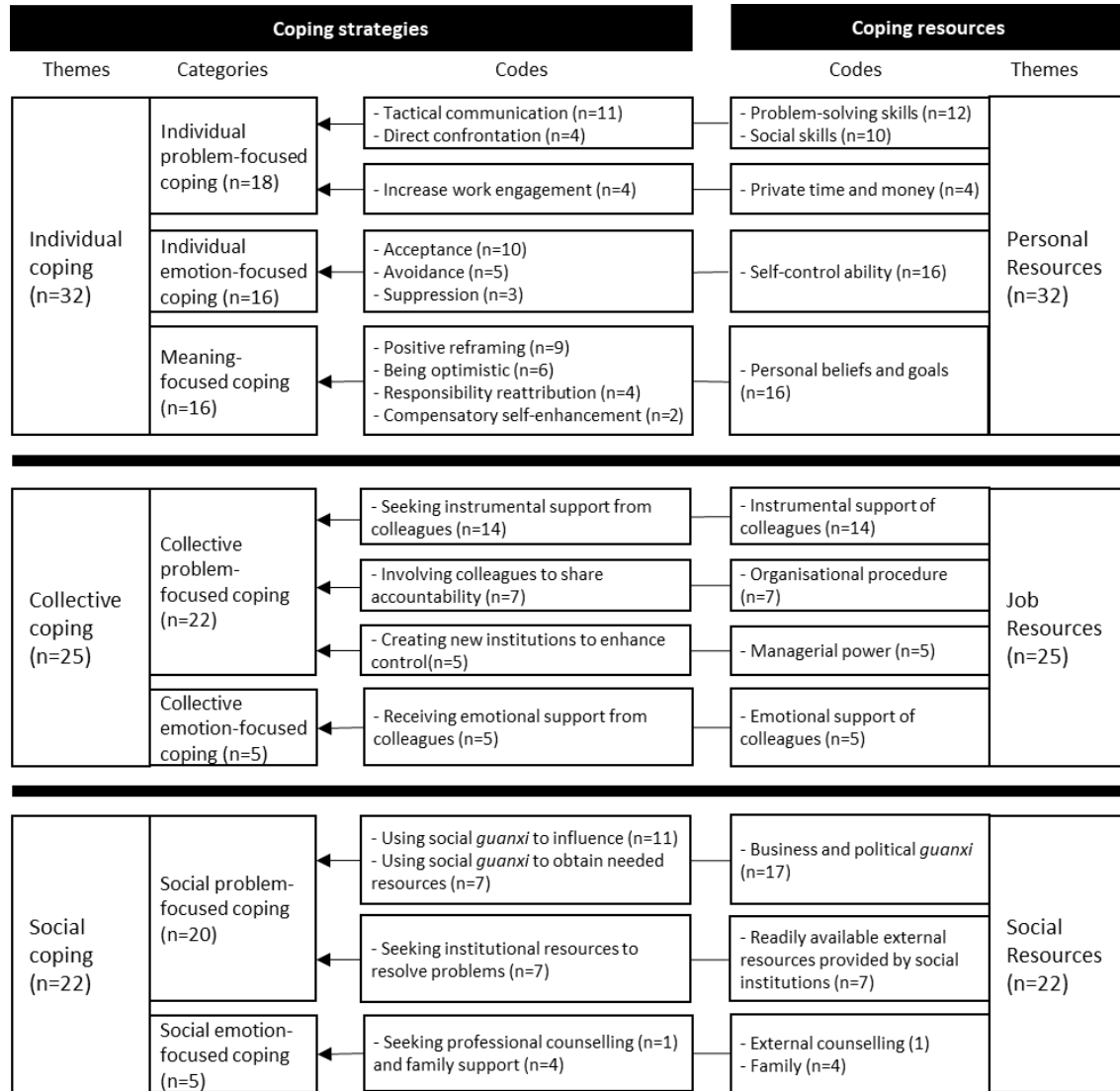
The aim of this research was to examine the experience of work stress of Chinese senior executives. While the previous chapter outlined the range of work stressors identified by senior executives, this chapter examines the second research question: *How do Chinese senior executives utilise resources to cope with their work stress?* As previously stated, work stress is conceptualised as a person-environment relationship that is out of equilibrium due to individuals experiencing excessive demands while having limited resources to cope (Dewe et al., 2013; Gomes et al., 2016). To briefly recap the theoretical underpinning of this research, work stress is influenced by primary and secondary appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The primary appraisal asks, “What is at stake?” by scanning and evaluating stressors in the environment; the secondary appraisal searches for evidence of adequate resources to cope. An underlying assumption is that if people are equipped with sufficient coping resources and they can apply them to implementing suitable coping strategies relevant to situations, they are more resistant to work stress (see Figure 3.1 in Chapter 3 for a detailed explanation of the theoretical framework). The emergent research of coping flexibility has shown consistent support for this idea (C. Cheng et al., 2014; Kato, 2020). Therefore, in order to achieve the research goal, it is necessary to explore how resources are utilised for coping.

Coping is the cognitive and behavioural efforts on the part of an individual to either change the situation or adjust to the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Research participants were asked to report a critical incident that reflected their experience of work stress and then were asked to describe how they managed the stress. Because resource utilisation for coping is one of the key focuses in this study, the data analysis concentrates on the relationship between coping strategies and coping resources rather than exploring the rationale of coping with a specific work stressor.

This research identified three main domains of resources, including personal resources, job resources, and social resources, which are linked with individual coping, collective coping, and social coping, respectively. Figure 6.1 is an overview of the results of the data analysis and illustrates the connection between coping strategies and coping

resources across the three different domains. How the coping resources facilitate the coping strategies in Figure 6.1 will be elaborated on in the following sections. It should be noted that I identified the key coping strategies embedded in each critical incident at the outset of data analysis. Through the data analysis process, attention was given to identifying coping resources related to a particular coping strategy.

Figure 6.1: Connections between coping strategies and coping resources



Note: N indicates the number of research participants who disclosed information related to the codes. The total number of research participants was 38.

6.2 Individual coping and personal resources

Individual coping refers to managing stress through individual efforts rather than receiving or seeking help from others (Rodríguez et al., 2019). Empirical research usually distinguishes between problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping (e.g. Mayordomo et al., 2016; Yoon et al., 2018), but meaning-making coping is commonly considered an independent way of coping (Dewe & Cooper, 2017; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004) because it helps adjust the meaning of negative events (C. L. Park & Folkman, 1997). In keeping with this perspective, this research identified three major individual coping strategies: individual problem-focused, individual emotion-focused, and individual meaning-focused coping. In this study, these coping strategies were found to be associated with several key personal resources, including beliefs and goals, problem-solving skills, social skills, self-control, and private time and money. Personal resources can be defined as personal characteristics or aspects of the self that are helpful for maintaining resilience and taking control of the environment (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014).

6.2.1 Individual problem-focused coping

Problem-focused coping involves an objective, analytical process of defining the problem, generating options for solutions, selecting a particular solution, and then implementing it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The data analysis of this research identified three individual problem-focused strategies, including 1) *tactical communication*, 2) *direct confrontation*, and 3) *increasing work engagement*. While tactical communication and direct confrontation primarily focuses on changing the environment, increasing work engagement is focused on adjusting the self. Despite these differences, a common theme was that individual problem-focused coping exclusively relied on personal efforts rather than group efforts to solve problems. The data analysis indicated that this coping strategy was largely underpinned by personal resources, including *problem-solving skills*, *social skills*, *self-control ability*, and *private time and money*.

Tactical communication is a salient coping strategy adopted by several research participants. Participants spoke about preparing a communication strategy related to the situation and acting on the strategy to build consensus through communicating with key stakeholders. This coping strategy is mainly supported by problem-solving and social

skills. Problem-solving skills refer to the ability to search for information, analyse the situation, and determine solutions underpinned by the person's knowledge, past experience, and intellectual ability (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Social skills are concerned with "the ability to communicate and behave with others in ways that are socially appropriate and effective" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 163). Social skills can enhance problem-solving skills as they take into account the social context. For example, when Fucheng had an indirect conflict with his boss regarding company management, he reported that he dealt with that with patience and good manners:

"I waited for a month and then I invited the boss for a dinner. I wanted to give him some time to reflect and realise his mistake. . . . I didn't talk about it directly (at the dinner). Instead, I talked about other things from which I could elicit the thing I wanted to talk about. Maybe communicating in this way made the conversation more natural. He might have felt less confrontational".

Tactical communication tends to be less direct and more polite in terms of taking a personal stance. In contrast, direct confrontation involves an aggressive attitude of expressing disagreement explicitly (i.e. Liang, Wen, Qikun, and Shuqi). However, it is not to say that this coping strategy is impulsive as such. In fact, the research participants did think through the situation and then decided to employ some confrontational behaviours to influence the situation. Thus, this strategy required some problem-solving skills. For example, when Qikun perceived a psychological contract breach regarding an incentive bonus, after a thorough consideration, he chose to confront his boss directly:

"If I obeyed his decision, although I could maintain a good relationship with my boss, I couldn't walk out from my bad mood. . . . I'd been thinking it over for quite some time and then I decided to do one thing. That was, I was going to have a showdown. I said: it is not right. I told him my thoughts. . . . I am usually afraid of my big boss. He is smarter, and has more experience than me. After all, he is the big boss. But I had a fight with him at that time".

After the direct confrontation with the boss, Qikun received the full incentive bonus. As shown in this case, direct confrontation can be an effective way to tackle an issue, but

Qikun admitted that it affected his interpersonal relationship with the boss. In particular, maintaining a harmonious interpersonal relationship is of paramount importance in Chinese society, whereas direct conflicts may cause the other party to lose face (A. C. Peng & Tjosvold, 2011). However, a closer investigation indicated that the application of direct confrontation might not completely disregard the social context. The present study found that upward confrontations (i.e. confronting superiors) only took place amongst POE and MOE research participants, while the SOE counterparts only reported downward confrontations (i.e. confronting subordinates). This difference is probably because the SOE environment is characterised to a greater extent by hierarchical distinction and high power distance (Shaheer et al., 2017). Thus, it may be socially appropriate to confront subordinates but not superiors in SOEs.

The last individual problem-focused coping strategy is to *increase work engagement*, a strategy that focuses on voluntarily adding personal effort to achieve work goals. Some research participants (i.e. Hui, Chao, Zhaowei, and Zhiling) spent their private time and money on fulfilling their work obligations. For example, Zhaowei talked about this strategy used to acquire more business deals for meeting a revenue target:

“It is not that you can deal with the problem in office hours, but rather that you need to subsidise your work by using your private time. Because you need to accommodate the client’s time. . . . Now, there are a lot of reforms such as cancelling the use of company cars and entertainment expenses. You’re not able to invite your clients to dinner on company expenses. Quite substantially, you have to rely on your own resources”.

In a nutshell, research participants made use of their personal financial and temporal resources to overcome work-related problems by either influencing the situation or modifying their work behaviours. This indicates that problem-focused coping in the work setting heavily relies on personal resources.

6.2.2 Individual emotion-focused coping

Emotion-focused coping regulates emotional distress but without directly changing the environment (Folkman, 1997). The analysis of data indicated that some research participants managed their negative emotions alone by utilising their personal resources

including self-control ability. Self-control ability is the capability of regulating attention in stressful events (Alberts et al., 2012). Empirical research has found that people with higher self-control ability tend to experience fewer and less intense emotional fluctuations (Layton & Muraven, 2014). This research discovered three individual emotion-focused coping strategies, including 1) *acceptance*, 2) *avoidance*, and 3) *suppression*.

Acceptance is a coping effort aimed at adapting to situations and accommodating the resultant personal emotions (van Der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2016). People who accept adversities appear to believe that things are unalterable but bearable (D. F. K. Wong, 2002). In this study, the research participants (e.g. Ming, Liang, Han, Dawei) chose to accept adversities because they knew that they were facing an intractable environment. For example, Liang was disciplined by the Commission for Discipline Inspection since he used his smart phone during a political study session where this behaviour was prohibited by a party rule. He felt very upset but had to try to come to terms with his emotional distress:

“You had to accept this reality! Right? You had to admit your mistake. According to their rules, you were wrong indeed. You didn’t have any excuse”.

The second emotion-focused coping strategy found in this research is avoidance (H.-H. Hu & Cheng, 2010), where some research participants switched to a passive attitude towards their work. It is characterised by withdrawal behaviours aimed at keeping away from threats (Herman-Stabl et al., 1995). Two research participants adopted an extreme form of avoidance when they decided to resign (i.e. Xiaoming and Dehua). In contrast, others employed a relatively mild form, that was, using some tactics of reducing work engagement, such as keeping away from office politics or not thinking about the issue (i.e. Ziqi, Xiaoming, Hong, and Jiabin). For example, while Xiaoming encountered a role conflict in meeting the divergent expectations from shareholders and employees, he reduced the time he spent in the office:

“I became reluctant to go to work. I didn’t want to face the employees. . . . Later, I basically went there twice a week. I didn’t want to stay there for too long. . . . I went home immediately once I finished my work that day”.

The last individual emotion-focused coping strategy identified in this study is suppression defined as an attempt to “decrease the frequency and intensity of unwanted emotions” (Alberts et al., 2012, p. 863). A likely way of suppressing emotions is to feel independent from the event and the emotion related to it (Roger et al., 1993). Correspondingly, a few research participants (i.e. Feifei, Jiaxin, and Lun) mentioned that they consciously tried to ignore their emotional needs by cognitively reminding themselves of the emotional requirement of the jobs. For example, Feifei was in charge of organising a nation-wide industrial conference, where there were many social activities such as hosting feasts and ceremonies requiring much emotional labour, while she was going through the emotional distress of a recent divorce. In order to maintain her emotional stability, she forced herself to mechanically boost up the positive side of emotion and suppressed her natural tendency to feel negative emotions related to her domestic situation. Regulating her emotions in this process required much effort in self-control. She commented on her state of mind at a business dinner:

“I didn’t feel good about that. I was not in the mood. I didn’t enjoy doing that (hosting the business dinner). . . . What I have just told you were what I needed to do but not my true intention. . . . I think I just insulated my own feelings. . . . I used my mind to command myself”.

In short, emotion-focused coping focuses on emotion management rather than changing the environment. The research participants relied on their self-control abilities to curb the unwanted emotions by accepting or avoiding the stressors or suppressing their emotions.

6.2.3 Individual meaning-focused coping

There seems to be a lack of consensus on how meaning-focused coping should be defined in the literature, but it can be generally understood as reappraising a stressful situation “in a manner that neutralises its problematic character” (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978, p. 2). Meaning-focused coping draws on cognitive reconstructions whereby people can construe their adversities in a less harmful manner (Dewe & Cooper, 2017). Cognitive reconstructions depend on cognitive schema constructed by personal beliefs and goals (C. L. Park & Folkman, 1997). The research participants in the present study employed their *beliefs and goals* to make sense of their stressful encounters in four different ways, including: 1) *positive reframing*, 2) *being optimistic*, 3) *responsibility reattribution*, and

4) *compensatory self-enhancement*. As they relied on their personal beliefs and goals to reappraise the encounters, this represents an individual way of coping.

Positive reframing refers to searching for perceived benefits in stressful events (C. L. Park & Folkman, 1997). In facing difficulties or undesirable outcomes, some research participants (e.g. Di, Feng, Zhaowei, Dawei) tried to view the stressful events from a positive perspective. For example, the events were seen to have enhanced team capability, strengthened interpersonal relationships, and facilitated career advancement. For example, while Ziqi was stressed about drafting a business proposal required by the Chairman, she tried to link it with the goal of personal growth:

“I try to change my perspective. That is, the Chairman has so much trust in me. The chairman entrusts me such an important task. He is giving me the opportunity to learn. He is giving me the opportunity to grow”.

Another form of meaning-focused coping is being optimistic. Some research participants (e.g. Wen, Xiaoming, Junjie, Yangyang) attempted to convince themselves that the stressful events were not serious by adopting different reasoning. For example, while Zhiling believed that the difficulty was only temporary, Wen held onto his belief that his self-efficacy could overcome many difficulties.

“You need to constantly remind yourself and hold on to a belief that it is only a temporary transition, just a temporary transition” (Zhiling).

“I am just confident. That is, no matter that I was a student in the past or I was joining the workforce later, I always believe that if I devote myself to something completely, I will definitively get anything done properly” (Wen).

The third form of meaning-focused coping is responsibility reattribution. It is defined as cognitively identifying someone or something that ought to be responsible for undesired outcomes (C. L. Park & Folkman, 1997). It seemed to help some research participants (i.e. Di, Xiaoming, Han, and Hujun) shake off the burden of a moral judgement that they themselves had caused the negative outcomes. For example, Di reattributed a project failure to the external environment:

“It’s not our fault that the project didn’t work out well. This is because the project was so cutting edge, exceeding the market conditions at that time. . . . Also, the international environment was changing fast, and domestic environment was complicated, so the progress of the project was not satisfactory”.

The last meaning-focused coping strategy is compensatory self-enhancement defined as being when individuals “compensate for threat or damage in one domain by focusing on or exaggerating their capabilities or virtues in other, unrelated domains” (C. L. Park & Folkman, 1997, p. 128). For example, Xianqi encountered a work-family conflict, that is, he needed to host a very important meeting whereas his wife wanted him to take the new-born to hospital. He reconciled his psychological conflict by emphasising the significance of the collective interest of the organisation, while downplaying the impact of not meeting family obligations. In this case, the belief of collectivism and the goal of defending the greater collective interest appeared to play a critical role in reappraising the situation from a different perspective. Therefore, Xianqi could reduce his guilt for not being able to accompany his family.

“If the company fails to perform well, I may affect many people in the company, say around two hundred people. . . . If I couldn’t find some time with the family, it’s only a personal sacrifice. If the company is affected, that would be a collective consequence”.

In summary, meaning-focused coping helps participants reconstruct their stressful encounters to be less intimidating through employing their beliefs and goals to make sense of the situations in different ways. Positive reframing helped them see the positive side of things; being optimistic was found to subjectively downgrade the severity of encounters; responsibility reattribution reduced the moral tension associated with responsibilities; and compensatory self-enhancement mitigated the stress by focusing on other obligations.

6.3 Collective coping and job resources

Collective coping is defined as coping efforts entailing some forms of organisational input to assist an individual to manage his or her work stress by targeting different coping functions. This study identified two main collective coping strategies: collective problem-

focused coping and collective emotion-focused coping. However, it is worth noting that the majority of research participants used collective problem-focused coping (n=20). By contrast, only five research participants resorted to collective emotion-focused coping. Two participants mentioned colleagues saying something that helped them reconstrue the meaning of the stressful situation. Although they mentioned two different meaning-focused coping strategies (i.e. responsibility reattribution and compensatory self-enhancement), neither strategies were reaffirmed by any another research participants. As a result, meaning-focused coping was not considered a salient theme in collective coping. Overall, the data analysis reveals an asymmetrical pattern of collective coping strategies as compared with individual coping where the research participants appear more flexible in utilising different coping strategies in an individual way. The research participants revealed that their collective coping strategies were facilitated by job resources, including *colleagues' instrumental and emotional support, organisational procedures, and managerial authority*. Job resources in this study refer to anything provided by the organisation or its members that is helpful for coping with work stress.

6.3.1 Collective problem-focused coping

Collective problem-focused coping focuses on managing the environment, and consists of three main strategies: 1) *seeking instrumental support from colleagues*; 2) *involving colleagues to share accountability*; and 3) *creating new organisational policies to enhance control*.

Many research participants looked for and utilised instrumental support across various organisational levels to resolve their work-related problems. The type of instrumental support depended on the relational status between the research participants and their colleagues. For example, some research participants (e.g. Youjia, Zhiling, Yifan, Yangyang) delegated work to and obtained professional advice from subordinates. Horizontally, others (i.e. Hong and Ziqi) sought opinions or garnered information that was not publicly available from peer senior executives. Furthermore, some research participants (e.g. Zhiling, Junjie, Shuqi, Weibo) leaned on superiors to gain more authority, coordination, and human resources. For example, Yifan talked about how his subordinates eased his workload:

“I have two assistants so far. One assistant helps manage my routine work and monitor project progresses. Another assistant with a master’s degree helps me write business proposals”.

In the example of seeking instrumental support from peer senior executives, Hong consulted other senior executives before she negotiated with the general manager on reducing an overambitious annual revenue target. She mentioned:

“I wanted to know whether we had similar situations before. Wanted to know if there was any precedent of successful rebellion. . . . After listening to them, I created a proposal. . . . Based on other managers’ advice, I cc’d (copied) it to our Chairman”.

Regarding superiors’ support, when facing a time-pressing project, the Chairman provided Junjie with the authority of project management and the needed human resources to meet the deadline. Junjie described:

“The Chairman said: you can tell me whatever resource you need. I established a project team. I am the team leader, and there were several members”.

In brief, the data analysis indicated that the research participants were able to seek job resources from various sources, including subordinates, peers, and superiors to enhance their ability in problem-solving.

Another strategy of collective problem-focused coping is to involve colleagues to share accountability through organisational procedures, such as collective decision-making, cross-departmental consultation, employee representatives’ meetings, and reporting to superiors. Although this coping strategy can enhance the effectiveness of problem-solving, its primary function aims to reduce the blame if a task fails or has any negative consequences (e.g. Liang, Peng, Junjie, Shuqi). For example, Liang was appointed to lead a performance appraisal reform that was perceived to be very likely to provoke resentment of employees. He insisted on inviting another senior executive to share the leadership with him in a reform meeting. He explained:

I just want to find another person to share these responsibilities.
Otherwise, if you agree to lead the reform by yourself, you will

become the centre of conflicts. At least now, I have another person to share the burden with me”.

The last strategy of collective problem-focused coping identified in this study is to create new organisational policies, such as a bonus distribution system, probational job rotation, adding amenities in public areas, and risk and hazard prevention, to enhance personal control for improving corporate performance (e.g. Peng, Chao, Yifan, Dawei). This is an interesting coping strategy because most coping strategies rely on using existent resources (P. T. P. Wong et al., 2006) but this strategy entails creating new resources. The research participants utilised their managerial power to enact new policies and facilitate their implementation. For example, in order to accomplish a very challenging business target assigned by the parent company, Chao pushed for the introduction of a very generous merit-based bonus distribution system. This new creation of policies was designed to boost the morale of employees and increase productivity. He explained:

“I used a new mechanism. I adjusted the policies of reward and punishment. I changed the methods of performance appraisal and motivation incentive. . . . If you work hard, if you get new deals, the company would reward you”.

In short, the findings demonstrate that Chinese senior executives were adaptive in terms of exploring, utilising, and even creating job resources to cope: they sought instrumental support from all layers within their organisations; they tried to reduce personal accountability by sharing some critical job tasks with colleagues; and invented new organisational policies to leverage their control.

6.3.2 Collective emotion-focused coping

Only a few research participants (i.e. Liang, Xiaoming, Xueyou, Han, and Jiaxin) revealed that their colleagues (e.g. superiors and peer senior executives) provided *emotional support* when they felt stressed at work. The colleagues shared their own stories of misfortune, expressed sympathy and understanding, or assured them that they would provide assistance if needed. It is worth pointing out that research participants tended to be offered emotional support rather than proactively approaching their colleagues for emotional support, except in situations when other colleagues also talked about their distress resulting from the shared situation. For example, when Xiaoming

provided an account regarding how he handled his distress of an ethical dilemma, he explained:

“Within the group of a few colleagues (in the top management team) who knew what was happening, we talked about our frustration with each other occasionally. But couldn’t talk about it with other colleagues widely. This was the only way I could alleviate my emotional distress”.

Peng explained that as a senior executive he was circumspect in terms of emotional expression. His words contain an altruistic motive of caring for others and protecting social harmony. He said:

“The biggest difficulty is that we have a lot of stress, but you should know that whatever has happened, you have to deal with it calmly. Because, everyone is watching you. Even though you are anxious, or you are under stress, you must look like you’re confident to handle the problem, not letting others worry”.

Maintaining emotional neutrality seems to be important in the Chinese workplace, especially for someone in a leadership position. Feifei elaborated on her concern regarding her divorce that could potentially be detrimental to her career:

“When I was just promoted, I was afraid of letting others know the changes in my family because it might be a signal that I was not competent in my job. I didn’t tell anyone in my workplace. . . . I think that in the past two years, I had been adjusting the balance between work and family. I have to control my emotions. I think that women at the workplace face a significant challenge – handling our emotions”.

In short, the use of collective emotion-focused coping was found to be very limited in this study. Only a few research participants reported this kind of coping. More interestingly, participants were not proactive in revealing their emotional distress, whereas it was more often the case that they gave reasons as to why they were unwilling to express emotions in the workplace. Instead, in a few cases, they occasionally shared emotions with someone

in a small work group who had the same experience, or they were passively given emotional support by colleagues who knew their stressful encounters.

6.4 Social coping and social resources

Although social support has been widely discussed in the literature, there is a lack of clarification of the difference between social support provided inside and outside the workplace. Therefore, social coping instead of social support is used here to describe attempts to cope with work stress by seeking and utilising resources outside the workplace. The resources provided by individuals or organisations being external to the workplace are considered to be social resources in this study. More than half of research participants (n=20) looked for social resources (resources from outside of their organisations, including social *guanxi* and institutional resources) for solving work-related problems. In comparison, only a few research participants (n=5) utilised social resources (including private counselling and family support) to restore their emotional equilibrium. Surprisingly, only one research participant mentioned meaning-focused coping where her husband helped her identify positive meanings from a negative event. Because this is just a single case, social meaning-focused coping was not considered a salient theme in the findings. This section focuses on social problem-focused coping and social emotion-focused coping.

6.4.1 Social problem-focused coping

The findings identified three main social problem-focused coping strategies underpinned by two social resources, respectively *social guanxi* and *institutional resources*: 1) *used social guanxi to influence the situation*; 2) *used social guanxi to obtain needed resources*; and 3) *sought institutional resources to resolve problems*.

Guanxi refers to informal, long-term, reciprocal social relationships in the Chinese context (Yum, 1988). Because *guanxi* can be cultivated within a wide array of settings, in this study social *guanxi* is used to encapsulate one's *guanxi* with *business associates* and *government officials*. As *guanxi* is built on *renqing* (reciprocity), *ganqing* (affection), and *xinren* (trust) (D. A. Yen et al., 2011), it is therefore a powerful social currency for business-related activities in China (Westwood & Lok, 2003).

Many research participants (e.g. Ming, Hui, Jianhua, Wujing) regardless of sector used social *guanxi* to cope with work stress. One common coping strategy was to use social

guanxi to influence or take control of a stressful situation. For example, in order to minimise the impact of a mistake made by a subordinate who unintentionally leaked a confidential agreement, Hui fixed the issue by his guanxi with the client. He elaborated:

“Using your personal connection or guanxi to ask for help. . . . Hoping that the client gives me face, or something else. It means that we could do each other favours in the future”.

Guanxi with government officials was also a very influential resource to smooth things out. For instance, Hujun gave an account regarding how he utilised guanxi with some high ranking officials to get an approval from the local Environmental Protection Bureau. He said:

“Based on the guanxi with the Mayor, after explaining our request to the municipal and provincial Environmental Protection Bureaus, then they agreed on our request. . . . If I couldn’t resolve it, then used private guanxi, seeking support from the Mayor or the Governor, to deal with it”.

While the two examples demonstrate that social guanxi can be used to influence the situation directly, several research participants (e.g. Jie, Chaowei, Hujun, Fucheng) across the three sectors demonstrated that social guanxi can amplify the ability to get the needed resources, such as professional service, a capital investment, and legal force. For example, since Fucheng failed in a litigation case, his friend introduced a very famous lawyer based on guanxi for an appeal. He explained:

“I got my friend to introduce a very prestigious lawyer to me. This lawyer was renowned by his record of succeeding in many high-profile domestic and internal lawsuits. He said that he usually did not bother to take trivial lawsuits if the service fee was under one million RMB. Later, because of guanxi with my friend, the lawyer accepted my request. . . . The lawyer only charged us 20 thousand RMB”.

Despite guanxi being very useful for resolving work-related problems, some research participants indicated that it tends to be the last resort of problem-solving. For example, Hujun commented that the guanxi with government officials is not unlimited, so it must be used discreetly:

“If it is purely a personal guanxi, if you bother the person too many times, then the person will be annoyed. So, I would try my best to resolve the problem by myself first. If I couldn’t resolve it, then I would seek guanxi at a higher level”.

An underlying reason for this cautiousness in regard to using government guanxi might relate to the obligation of long-term reciprocity of guanxi in Chinese society. In other words, using guanxi to achieve something can engender a personal debt in the social exchange with the person who has given the help. Based on conservation of resources theory, people are averse to a loss in their resources (Hobfoll, 1989). The use of social guanxi was determined by a holistic consideration including the severity of the situation and the effectiveness of job resources for dealing with that situation.

The last social problem-focused coping strategy was to seek *institutional resources*. Some research participants (e.g. Chaowei, Wen, Han, Ronghao) disclosed that they resorted to external social entities to acquire resources, such as advice or solutions provided by external experts, free human resources offered by university internship programmes, courses offered by universities, consultation services provided by government agencies, and legal protection provided by police stations. This coping strategy is different from using social guanxi to obtain needed resources in that resources are sought and acquired through a formal, official channel (e.g. dialling 111 for an emergency), whereas the latter relies on informal, private channel (e.g. calling an acquaintance who knows a police officer). For example, Zhiling was assigned to establish a new business division related to the health industry. She was under stress because she was uncertain about how to do that. In order to cope, she resorted to consulting different government agencies that supervise the health industry. She said:

“The key is to obtain information. The key is know-how. I was so confused, because didn’t know what to do. Didn’t know the potential risk or the key point. . . . So, I visited each relevant government agency. Because if you want to create a new business, it must operate under the supervision of some government bodies, such as the Medical Products Administration, Health and Family Planning Commission, or other government agencies related to the health industry. I tried to figure out,

tried to think a step ahead, for example, whether they have any mandatory requirements”.

The Chinese market seems to be very dynamic as described by many research participants. As a result, the reason for employing social resources seems to be associated with the lack of suitable job resources that may not well adapt to the pace of market changes. For example, Ziqi talked about the lack of colleagues with the relevant knowledge and expertise who could assist her operationalise the boss’s new business strategy:

“I am not over-confident here. This is a new area of business, so they may have no idea. There are more than 700 people in the company. Frankly speaking, they are all doing traditional businesses. They don’t have the internet thinking”.²⁴

In short, social *guanxi* and institutional resources represent informal and formal social resources. They complement a deficiency in job resources through the use of *guanxi* to directly influence the situation, to increase their ability to acquire resources, or to obtain readily available institutional resources through official means.

6.4.2 Social emotion-focused coping

Social emotion-focused coping draws on the use of external resources such as *professional counselling services* and interactions with *family members* to manage distress. While only one research participant (i.e. Feifei) mentioned the use of counselling, a few research participants (i.e. Chao, Jiaxin, Zitao, and Wujing) resorted to family support.

Interestingly, female and male research participants seemed to utilise the family domain differently for stress management. Male research participants tended to conceal their emotions and avoid talking about work when they stayed with their families. Instead, they tried to forget their work hassles by fully concentrating on domestic interactions. For example, Zitao commented:

²⁴ The concept – “internet thinking” is derived from the Chinese e-commerce industry. It is “a philosophical theory, i.e. a brand-new understanding of the entire world of business that specifically touches on the three aspects of Internet spirit, Internet philosophy and Internet economy” (H. Li et al., 2015, p. 117).

“Family offers a great help for reducing stress. . . . You shouldn’t bring the stress home, but you can forget your stress and adjust yourself in the warmth atmosphere of family. . . . It doesn’t help at all if you talk about your stress but only provokes unnecessary panic. If you can fully enjoy your time with the family, it is a better way to release your stress”.

In contrast, a female research participant, Jiaxin, had no hesitation in expressing her distress at being bullied while she was on an overseas trip. She explained:

“I refrained from talking about it until back to the hotel. . . . I called my husband at night and complained about it. I told him I was very upset. I cried”.

Social emotion-focused coping appears to remedy the lack of organisational initiatives for stress management. Feifei commented on the absence of organisational interventions:

“In fact, we don’t have any psychological intervention mechanisms in the company. Whatever problem you are facing, you don’t have any resource offered by the company. . . . We just don’t have any training in such area. Just don’t have. It’s fully on your own to cope”.

In short, this section has shown that family emotional support is important to both female and male senior executives despite being used differently. Additionally, family emotional support appears to be more common than counselling in helping the research participants reduce their emotional distress.

6.5 Conclusion

The findings show how personal, job, and social resources are utilised to cope with work stress. First, participants utilised personal resources to implement individual coping strategies to resolve problems, regulate emotions, and seek meaning for negative events. Secondly, most research participants mobilised job resources to deal with problems, but they tended to underutilise job resources for managing their emotional distress. Thirdly, participants exhibited similar patterns in social coping. They actively sought social resources to resolve problems, whereas they were passive in seeking emotional support from others outside the organisation. These findings together illustrate an asymmetrical pattern of coping strategies in terms of problem-focused, emotion-focused, and meaning-

focused across the three domains of coping (individual, collective and social). That is, participants strived to resolve problems in the organisational and social domains. However, they appeared to be reluctant to reveal their emotional distress to others both inside and outside of the workplace. Lastly, the findings indicate that both formal and informal resources help participants implement social coping. Formal resources mainly include institutional resources publicly available in society (e.g. consultation services provided by government agencies, police protection, part-time university courses, and human resources of internship programmes, hiring external experts, and counselling services). Informal resources comprise social guanxi and family support. These findings provide a complex picture of the structure of resources critical for social coping amongst senior executives. The discussion chapter which follows discusses these key findings.

Chapter 7: Discussion

7.1 Introduction

While Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 identified the key stressors and coping strategies employed by Chinese senior executives, this chapter discusses the findings. This chapter also contains a section contextualising the work stress of Chinese senior executives by elaborating on the influence of the Chinese context.

7.1 Work stressors

7.1.1 Performance uncertainty

This study shows that feeling uncertain about job performance is a salient work stressor for Chinese senior executives. Previous work stress studies have examined many unidimensional conditions contributing to work stress, including role ambiguity (Lee & Mathur, 1999) organisational politics (Labrague et al., 2017), role overload (Linda Duxbury et al., 2018), incompetent staff (Lustig et al., 2008), turbulent regulatory environment (Beusaert et al., 2016), difficult external stakeholders (F. Yang et al., 2017), macroeconomic environment (Bunn et al., 2013), and extreme weather conditions (Hlotova et al., 2014), but they are not linked to performance uncertainty. This study indicates that these conditions can indirectly elicit stress by provoking a sense of performance uncertainty. Thus, performance uncertainty appears to be a more direct cause of work stress. Because senior executives' job performance is primarily evaluated by the overall performance of their firms as measured by financial indicators (Dirk & Fadi, 2015; Stock et al., 2014), their job performance is equivalent to organisational performance.

People are motivated to make efforts if they expect that the efforts will result in a desired job performance that will produce positive outcomes (Beehr, 1998). Accordingly, people feel stressed when they are unclear about the likelihood of their efforts producing the desired job performance. In the other words, stress arises from a sense of uncertainty. Empirical research has consistently shown detrimental personal consequences of uncertainty, such as illnesses (T. Yang et al., 2018), high blood pressure (Greco & Roger, 2003), and anxiety (Monat et al., 1972). Researchers have studied only a few organisational factors in relation to uncertainty, including role ambiguity, role conflicts,

and organisational changes (e.g. DeGhetto et al., 2017; O' Driscoll & Beehr, 1994). However, as shown by Figure 7.1 (which summarises the factors found to play a part in performance uncertainty in this study), performance uncertainty does not only emanate from organisational factors, including role ambiguity, role overload, organisational politics, and poor performing subordinates, but also environmental factors, including a challenging regulatory environment, a competitive business environment, demanding external stakeholders, and adverse natural conditions. This finding resonates with research by Dirk and Fadi (2015) which showed that CEOs were dismissed after poor firm performance resulted from factors beyond their control, such as industry and the market.

Figure 7.1: Model of performance uncertainty



Performance uncertainty as a salient work stressor may be shaped by the large scope of managerial responsibilities in the upper echelon context. Firstly, senior executives usually assume an active boundary spanning role within an organisation and at the interface between the organisation and the environment (Birkinshaw et al., 2017). The boundary spanning role is to reconcile divergent expectations of various stakeholders and gain their support for achieving the goals of the organisation (Lysonski et al., 1988). As senior executives usually interact with a wide range of stakeholders and are involved in different environmental domains, they often suffer from information overload and experience difficulty in information-possessing (Y. Wang & Yang, 2015). Secondly, as senior executives represent their organisations (Cottan-Nir, 2019), they assume responsibility for staff or system failures. For example, Kelly et al. (2016) found that executive nurse directors were likely to become the scapegoat for health care mistakes caused by subordinates or system failures. Thirdly, senior executives usually make strategic decisions in their day to day role (Ganster, 2005). Zhi (2009) adds that CEOs are entrusted

to make decisions on behalf of the board of directors, so they are liable for operational risks under their management. As strategic changes require much in the way of organisational resources and take a long period of time to reveal their effect, feelings of organisational performance uncertainty may persist amongst senior executives who oversee the strategic changes. Strategic failures can be fatal to the job security of senior executives. For instance, research shows that in 2005, 35% of CEOs in North America were forced to resign due to unsatisfactory organisational performance (Lucier et al., 2006). In a nutshell, senior executives are in positions that face performance uncertainty since they are accountable for managing complicated environments, bear the risk of organisational failures, and withstand the uncertain outcomes of strategic decisions.

In short, while maintaining good organisational performance is a common demand for senior executives (Hambrick et al., 2005a), this study has revealed that work stress emerges when this demand is difficult to meet due to an array of organisational and environmental uncertainty factors.

7.1.2 Political-business role conflict

The role conflict literature mainly focuses on divergent expectations from stakeholders in business and private domains. This study found a similar pattern in relation to the source of role conflicts in the literature, and in addition revealed a new form of role conflict: political-business role conflict. As shown in the case of Chinese senior executives, political embeddedness in the corporate environment exerts considerable impact on their work stress. This study makes an original contribution to the work stress literature by showing the relevance of political forces in the workplace. The following discussion will briefly reflect on some conventional role conflicts found in this study, and then discuss the newfound political-business role conflict.

7.1.2.1 *Conventional role conflicts*

Chinese senior executives face multiple role conflicts that are generally in line with the literature. First of all, this study showed that they suffer serious family-work conflicts due to their demanding senior executive jobs and more family obligations in their middle age. This is in keeping with previous research (Stock et al., 2014). Secondly, the difficulty of maintaining personal well-being and meeting excessive job demands found in this study resonates with the work-life balance literature (Beáta, 2020; S. Braun & Peus, 2016).

Thirdly, the situation in which senior executives face moral dilemmas when personal ethics clash with job requirements (Reynolds et al., 2012) was also found in this study. Fourthly, due to different perspectives within top management teams, senior executives' own beliefs and goals can contradict with those of others (G. Chen et al., 2005; Ferguson et al., 2019; Parayitam et al., 2010). Fifthly, previous studies have documented various types of shareholder conflicts (Martin et al., 2017; Z. Wang, 2017), which can result in incompatible expectations upon senior executives. Sixthly, senior executives face role conflicts in managing divergent interests between their superiors and subordinates (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017). Lastly, senior executives are expected to reconcile the disparity of expectations between internal and external stakeholders, such as government officials, regulatory bodies, and industry associations (Birkinshaw et al., 2017).

7.1.2.2 Political-business role conflict

A new work stressor identified in this research is political-business role conflict. This research found that party-building activities carried out in office hours can disrupt normal business operations in SOEs and MOEs. Party-building has been a long-standing initiative to build a strong connection between the central CCP committee and party members in various organisations, with the primary purpose of disseminating political principles and boosting popularity of the CCP amongst the working population (Thornton, 2012). Since 2015, dangjian or party-building reform has been implemented to strengthen the leadership role of the CCP in the corporate governance of SOEs through institutionalisation such as changing corporate charters (L. Y.-H. Lin et al., 2019). Under this political movement, party-building is constituted through symbolic and substantial components (L. Y.-H. Lin & Milhaupt, 2020). While the symbolic component is characterised by the requirement of organising and attending party-building activities such as political studies and recreational activities with a political theme, the substantial component is about allowing the CCP more formal power through participating in business management and operations, such as appointing key personnel and making strategic decisions (L. Y.-H. Lin & Milhaupt, 2020).

A large body of literature has focused on the relationship between political connection and corporate performance in China and has found that political connection can help obtain preferential access to resources such as bank loans and administrative approvals (Conyon et al., 2015; Kung & Ma, 2018; F. Yu, 2018). This study indicates that political

demands only appears as symbolic party-building (i.e. requiring time for organising or attending party-building activities) rather than substantial party-building (i.e. direct intervention of operations and management). This is an interesting finding as some scholars argue that there might be tension between business and political interests because social and political goals can be incongruent with commercial interests and logics (L. Y.-H. Lin et al., 2019; J. Liu et al., 2020). For example, J. Liu et al. (2020) found that local governments in China underpriced initial public offerings (IPOs) in order to boost the regional economy despite companies being unwilling to discount their shares.

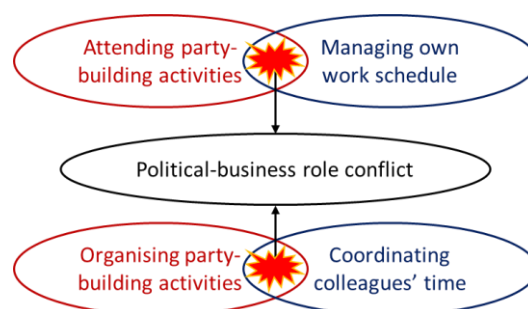
Three potential reasons may account for why substantial party-building is not found as a contributing factor to work stress in this study. Firstly, there is still persistent resistance within Chinese enterprises to formalising the leadership role of the CCP in daily business operations and management (C. Xu & Feng, 2020). Based on a study of the corporate charters relating to party-building of Chinese listed enterprises, L. Y.-H. Lin and Milhaupt (2020) showed that symbolic provisions, such as establishing internal party committees and providing financial support for party activities, were widely adopted by over 95% of the sampled enterprises. In contrast, the rate of substantial party-building indicated by incorporating the provision of prior consultation with the party committee by the management for important decision-making is less than 38%. Their findings suggest that direct political intervention in business decisions still lacks institutional enforcement. The second possible reason is that participation in business operations and management requires professional knowledge, which is a barrier to the active engagement in business decision-making by the party office (C. Xu & Feng, 2020). The last probable reason is that SOE senior executives might have adapted well to the political agenda in SOEs since SOEs are controlled by the government. Especially, there is a cadre rotation system in China enabling a dual path encompassing both a political and corporate career (J. Wang, 2014). Therefore, a sound political awareness seems to be an important prerequisite to succeed in either career track. Even if there is intensified political intervention in business operations and management, senior executives in SOEs have a tendency to comply with political requirements because of their politically bounded career.

As previously stated, this study found that the time required for symbolic party-building activities detracts from other business activities. This is consistent with the literature that has shown that party-building is pervasive in SOEs and MOEs (J. Wang & Tan, 2020).

Symbolic party-building activities can be time consuming for Chinese senior executives since there are new requirements. Party-building nowadays aims to boost the party's popularity and relevance amongst young Chinese employees by providing services and activities that are more relevant to their personal needs (Yan & Huang, 2017). In the Mao-era, party-building activities were mainly composed of dissemination of instructions and information from the central committee, discussion of current principles and policies, and criticism and self-criticism. Although these traditional party-building activities still remain, new party-building activities require innovative formats, such as entrepreneurial training and seminars, dating and networking events, and sport and recreational activities imbued with political themes (Thornton, 2012). As these activities are more interesting and helpful in addressing personal problems, they are thought to be more effective in attracting new party members and maintaining a strong, sincere connection between the CCP and existing members (Thornton, 2012). However, under the new movement, party-building appears to be more challenging than in the past.

The political-business role conflict revealed in this study is twofold (as shown in Figure 7.2). Chinese senior executives who are ordinary members of the CCP need to attend party-building activities. The stress from this requirement is that they feel it is difficult to spare time for meeting clients, resolving daily operational issues, and other normal business activities. On the other hand, those with key political roles such as Party Secretary need to organise party-building activities for other CCP members in Chinese enterprises. This means that they have to coordinate colleagues' (with the CCP membership) time for allowing them to attend party-building activities. In this process, they can encounter dissonance caused by the disruption of party-building activities during office hours. These findings add to the work stress literature by integrating the political demands of party-building under one-party ruling country like China.

Figure 7.2: Model of political-business role conflict



As scholars have argued, political penetration has been prominent in both state and private enterprises (L. Y.-H. Lin & Milhaupt, 2020), it is somewhat unexpected that political-business role conflict is only found in SOE and MOE senior executives in this study. This is probably because political demands may be more directly relevant to business owners in POEs rather than their professional senior executives. According to a national survey, nearly 70% of private business owners with CCP membership are also the party secretaries in their companies (Yan & Huang, 2017). As private business owners usually take up the key political roles in the party office in POEs, they are directly responsible for addressing political demands rather than the professional senior executives. Even if there is a conflicting expectation between the CCP and the business, the business owners can deal with the problem at their discretion and the professional senior executives only need to follow the business owner's decisions. As a result, professional senior executives in POEs are less exposed to the political-business role conflict. This may be why none of POE senior executives in the present study reported a political-business role conflict.

In summary, political demand is a defining source of work stress for Chinese senior executives. Researchers have mainly focused on the impact of political connections on firm performance, whereas its effect on work stress has not yet been formally studied. This study revealed that the CCP has generated a demand on office time for symbolic party-building activities amongst SOE and MOE senior executives, the compliance of which can cause some Chinese senior executives to struggle to perform their business roles. This finding expands the work stress literature by demonstrating that the party-membership role can pose substantial demands conflicting with those attached to the business role.

7.1.3 Harmony-maintenance challenges

This study revealed that interpersonal issues as a work stressor entails both interpersonal conflict and harmony-maintenance challenges. Before discussing harmony-maintenance challenges as a novel stressor, this section briefly reflects on three main interpersonal conflicts found in this study: workplace bullying, workplace violence, and psychological contract breach.

7.1.3.1 Interpersonal conflicts

Despite their seniority, Chinese senior executives can be the victims of workplace bullying and violence. Power imbalance is a main cause of workplace bullying (Zapf & Gross, 2001). Correspondingly, this study found that the Chinese senior executive who experiences workplace bullying has an asymmetric power relationship with another colleague who possesses more power in the office. Besides, workplace violence tends to be associated with some high-risk professions, such as workers in correction facilities and psychiatric hospitals (Rasmussen et al., 2013). In line with the literature, this study has shown that the Chinese senior executives who encounter workplace violence are all from the construction industry. Construction in China is known for a high risk of violent behaviours due to the poorly supervised subcontracting system and lack of labour protection (Ngai & Huilin, 2010).

Breach of psychological contracts as a salient work stressor has attracted increasing attention in recent research (e.g. Costa & Neves, 2017; Duran et al., 2019; Shin, 2019). This study confirms those findings. Conservation of resource (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) is often employed to explain why a psychological contract breach can contribute to work stress (e.g. Duran et al., 2019; Garcia et al., 2018). That is, a psychological breach can generate “a perceived threat, failure to gain, or actual loss of valued resources” (Garcia et al., 2018, p. 326). The COR theory posits that when any of these three scenarios happen, people start feeling stressed (Hobfoll, 1989). Psychological contract breach that takes place between employees and superiors can mean relationship deterioration which in turn affects the employee’s ability to maintain and acquire valuable resources in the workplace. Existing studies have only focused on employees rather than senior executives (Achnak et al., 2018; Costa & Neves, 2017; Garcia et al., 2018). Although the managerial rank of senior executives is above most employees in organisations, their managerial power is not infinite as they still work under someone, such as a chairman or a business owner. Hence, they can form psychological contracts with their employers. Additionally, in this research, psychological contract breaches are not specifically related to a particular sector, industry, or gender. This research adds to the literature by showing that a psychological contract breach can be a prevalent work stressor for Chinese senior executives.

7.1.3.2 *Harmony-maintenance challenges*

Interpersonal harmony has been discussed in prior research. However, as L.-L. Huang (2016, p. 1) notes, “psychological research in Western society has intriguingly long been focused more on interpersonal conflict than on interpersonal harmony”. Up to 2015, the number of published articles about harmony is 50 times fewer than those related to conflict (L.-L. Huang, 2016). C. C. Chen et al. (2016) also note a similar asymmetric pattern of research studies regarding conflict and harmony in premier organisation and management journals. Most organisational studies of harmony focus on exploring how the value of harmony influences conflict resolution (e.g. Friedman et al., 2006; C. Liu et al., 2018). A general view shared by scholars is that people with a high level of harmony orientation tend to use avoidance strategies to deal with conflicts (K. Leung et al., 2002). Also, endurance and tolerance of interpersonal conflict are considered to be typical behavioural responses driven by the value of harmony (Chin & Liu, 2015). So far, harmony has mainly been seen as a social value influencing people’s behavioural response to interpersonal conflict.

This study extends the work stress literature by identifying challenges to harmony-maintenance as a work stressor. The following discussion firstly compares the concepts of harmony and conflict. Next, it justifies harmony-maintenance challenges as a stressor by drawing on relevant harmony literature. Lastly, it discusses the conditions for this work stressor to prevail.

7.1.3.2.1 *Conceptualising harmony*

The Eastern *yin-yang* philosophy sees harmony as a process of harmonisation, where conflicts and contradictions exist in an intricate balance (Chin & Liu, 2015). In this view, harmony is not the result of eradication of conflicts or differences but is a dynamic process of maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between two opposite parties. In comparison, from the Western perspective, harmony is a perfect unity or absolute solution of disagreeing elements (Chin, 2014). Chin and Liu (2015, p. 294) add that “the Western concept of harmony is thus viewed as a science, beginning with the identification and recognition of conflicts and contradictions”. Scholars generally agree that harmony is the goal in and of itself for Chinese people (K. Leung et al., 2011; K. Leung et al., 2002). Because the work stress literature is dominated by Western research, this culturally rooted tendency to investigate conflict rather than harmony may explain why existing

work stress studies fail to identify harmony-maintenance challenges as a stressor, whereas interpersonal conflict is widely acknowledged (e.g. Frone, 2000; Ilies et al., 2011).

Harmony is not a by-product of successful conflict resolution but it is an important goal for Chinese people, so it represents an unspoken social demand shared by Chinese people. L.-L. Huang (2016) provides a model by demonstrating a harmonisation stage and a conflict-resolution stage. Based on her model, harmonisation takes place prior to conflict-resolution. The harmonisation stage consists of genuine harmony and superficial harmony. Genuine harmony refers to a sincere, trustful, active, and supportive interpersonal interaction underpinned by positive perceptions of each other. By contrast, superficial harmony is based on negative perceptions of each other, so the interpersonal interaction tends to be cautious, defensive, and ceremonial (L.-L. Huang, 2016). Superficial harmony is a volatile interpersonal state where conflict can easily externalise because “both parties attempt to maintain a deceptive outward harmony as a camouflage, but inwardly sense disharmony” (L.-L. Huang, 2016, p. 4). Superficial harmony can be a taxing demand as the interactants need to conceal their emotions and thoughts by carefully managing their words and actions. Likewise, maintaining genuine harmony entails energy and other resources for positive actions (K. Leung et al., 2011). Hence, harmony maintenance can be seen as an informal interpersonal demand in the workplace. Research found that Japanese nurses who value workplace harmony felt compelled to make superficial agreement with physicians, senior nurses, and institutional rules even though they saw better ways of providing care to patients (Konishi et al., 2009). These nurses had the intent to improve their work, but they also felt conflicted by the risk of disrupting workplace harmony. Unfortunately, despite harmony being a potential source of work stress, no research has examined this effect so far.

7.1.3.2.2 Harmony-maintenance challenge as a stressor

Because harmony maintenance is an important goal in China, work stress can arise when meeting this goal is impeded by a particular job setting. The term *harmony-maintenance challenge* has been coined in this study to describe this scenario. For example, a senior executive is contemplating how to talk to a subordinate who has been working with the senior executive for many years but is about to be dismissed by the enterprise. Based on cybernetic theory of stress, psychological stress occurs when people perceive a mismatch between their desired state and the perceived reality (Edwards, 1992). As pursuing

harmony is deeply ingrained in Chinese society, any threat to interpersonal harmony in the workplace may be particularly alarming. Cross-cultural research has constantly revealed that Chinese people have a stronger desire to embrace interpersonal harmony than Western people, such as Australians and Americans (Friedman et al., 2006; K. Leung et al., 2011).

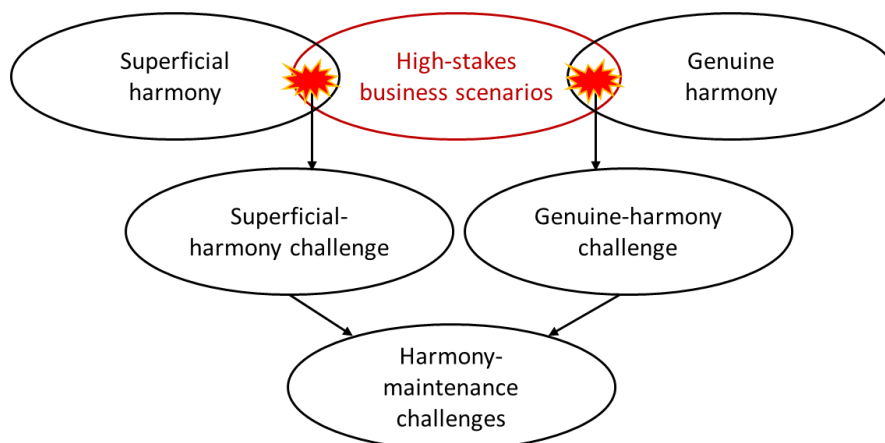
An important distinction between harmony-maintenance challenges and interpersonal conflicts is that the former reflect a future-orientation of preventing conflict and the desire of strengthening interpersonal relationships, whereas the latter emphasise the distress of actual negative interpersonal encounters. The work stress literature so far mainly focuses on the conflict-resolution stage but not the harmonisation stage as illustrated in Huang's model (2016). This can be seen in the large body of research of interpersonal conflicts around workplace bullying, violence, harassment, and open argument (e.g. Kessler et al., 2013; Pseekos et al., 2011; Stoetzer et al., 2009). These interpersonal issues tend to be overt and explicit, having an acute effect on psychological well-being. In contrast, harmony-maintenance challenges can signal an anticipative pressure of conflict, but not necessarily mean that the focal person is undergoing an actual interpersonal conflict.

It should be noted that harmony-maintenance challenges as a stressor is a dualistic construct. This study indicates that Chinese senior executives are not only concerned about the negative repercussion of interpersonal relationships but also perceive a responsibility to defend members' well-being (i.e. income, career, and safety). In fact, there are at least three models of harmony resonating with this idea, although their authors did not discuss the models in the work stress context. As already explained above in L.-L. Huang's (2016) model, people's behaviour can be dictated by genuine and superficial harmony. Similarly, K. Leung (1997) identifies two constructs called "disintegration avoidance" and "harmony enhancement". While disintegration avoidance means "avoiding actions that will strain a relationship and lead to its weakening and dissolving", harmony enhancement stands for "engaging in behaviours presumed to strengthen the relationships among the interactants" (K. Leung, 1997, p. 644). In the same vein, K. Leung et al. (2002) posit that instrumental harmony and value harmony are two different constructs of harmony. According to their work, classical Confucianism promotes value harmony, an ideal form of harmony which emphasises humanity and morality, whereas the secular version of Confucianism or cultural collectivism is in line with instrumental

harmony, an act in which people conceal hostility and avoid conflicts because of utilitarian concern or practical importance. The commonality of these three models is to classify harmony into two groups: Genuine harmony resembles harmony enhancement and value harmony by sharing an intrinsic noble motive of caring for others; superficial harmony, disintegration avoidance, and instrumental harmony are similar to each other because the motive of engaging in harmonious interactions is primarily utilitarian or pragmatic. Since superficial and genuine harmony has been increasingly adopted by researchers (e.g. Chang et al., 2020; Z.-X. Zhang & Wei, 2017), these terms are adopted in this study to capture the two components of harmony-maintenance.

Figure 7.3 illustrates the two components of harmony-maintenance challenges. Superficial-harmony challenge is the situation in which people perceive the difficulty of avoiding interpersonal conflicts that have yet to happen. An illustrative scenario is that leading a remuneration reform can possibly provoke animosity and resistance. The senior executive who is appointed to lead the reform feels extremely reluctant to take on this responsibility because of the potential loss of harmonious interpersonal relationships. The leadership position of senior executives may make them particularly susceptible to superficial-harmony challenge since they are obligated to manage some high-stakes business scenarios, such as deciding on and implementing some important organisational changes or dealing with some sensitive employment issues (e.g. radical reform and individual dismissal).

Figure 7.3: Model of harmony-maintenance challenges



Regarding genuine-harmony challenge, Chinese senior executives can have a sincere concern for subordinates' well-being due to the influence of classical Confucianism that emphasises the value of benevolence and righteousness (K. Leung et al., 2002). When there is a high-stakes business scenario that constrains their ability to fulfil this culturally desired duty, Chinese senior executives may perceive a threat to genuine harmony. For instance, facing a very tough negotiation with a prospective client, a Chinese senior executive worries that losing this major business deal would jeopardise employees' income and career. One may argue that it is part of a senior executive's formal duty to strike a deal to the best of his or her ability. However, the Chinese executive in this case reveals an affective connection with the employees rather than simply stating their job duties. According to the Confucian doctrine of *wu lun*, social harmony is not built on an unidirectional receiving of respect and obedience by subordinates, but instead it is underpinned by a bi-directional exchange, where superiors have an obligation of protecting and nurturing the well-being of subordinates (Hofstede, 2001). Viewed from this perspective, genuine-harmony is a culturally desired duty for Chinese senior executives, whereas the challenge of achieving this goal represents a stressor.

7.1.3.2.3 Debating the universality of harmony-maintenance challenges

Whether the challenge of harmony maintenance as a work stressor is more prominent or even unique to China remains unclear. However, there has been an ongoing debate about the role harmony plays in conflict resolution in different cultures (Z.-X. Zhang & Wei, 2017). Although Chinese people greatly adhere to harmony maintenance, people in other cultures, including Japanese, South Korean, and Zapotec peoples in Mexico also stress the importance of harmony in interpersonal interaction (Kim & Plester, 2018; Konishi et al., 2009; Nadar, 1990). Therefore, harmony-maintenance challenges may not be unique to Chinese people, while the phenomenon can be largely determined by sociocultural conditions. C. Liu et al. (2018, p. 51) attest to the fact that "the effect of harmony on employees' behaviours may not be universal, but be culture-bound". They discovered an interesting finding that American employees who report a higher score of harmony orientation experience more co-worker conflicts when dealing with interpersonal injustices. They infer that an individualistic norm can override the personal value of harmony. Only when personal value is congruent with the wider social expectation, can it have a significant impact on behaviours (Oyserman et al., 2002). Restoring justice and

protecting personal rights appear to be paramount for employees in Western cultures like the U.S. (C. Liu et al., 2018). Thus, these individualistic values shared in the wider society may limit the importance of practising harmony in the workplace (K. Leung et al., 2011).

It is likely that the pursuit of harmony maintenance becomes significant when cultural values in the wider society are also emphasised in the workplace. X. Chen (2020) discovered that some traditional values such as *guanxi* and harmony strengthen people's tendency to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships in Chinese SOEs. This tendency is further strengthened by socialistic values such as collectivism, group solidarity, and communal sharing preserved in the public sector (X. Chen, 2018; Michael & János, 1985). From this perspective, the overlap between social and organisational values can promote the need for harmony maintenance in the workplace. This is in line with the findings in this study that harmony-maintenance challenges are only found in SOEs and MOEs in which a two-way performance appraisal policy is common. As both superiors and subordinates can have a chance to rate and comment on each other, senior executives in this work environment tend to be very cautious in handling managerial tasks that are likely to affect interpersonal relationships at work.

In short, this analysis has identified interpersonal conflicts as well as harmony-maintenance challenges as relevant work stressors for Chinese senior executives. It has shown that interpersonal issues do not always result from interpersonal conflicts, but also emanate from maintaining interpersonal harmony. It is unclear whether this finding holds true in other cultural contexts. Nevertheless, this research indicates that senior executives in SOEs and MOEs that share more social values such as harmony and importance of *guanxi* appear to face challenges in maintaining harmony.

7.1.4 Self-initiated work goals

Although threats to career development have been recognised as an important source of work stress, “studies linking stressful experiences with the pursuit of a professional career remain limited” (P. Yang, 2017b, p. 157). Previous research has tended to focus on negative career-related stressors, including job insecurity, perceived career incompetency, career plateauing, orientation conflict, career imbalance, and career indecision (B. Y. Choi et al., 2011; Cooper et al., 2001; Larson et al., 1994; P. Yang, 2017b; P. Yang & Yang, 2019). The present research extends the work stress literature by demonstrating

both negative and positive career-related stressors: *perceived competency mismatch* and *self-initiated work goal* respectively. While prior research has discussed perceived competency mismatch (P. Yang, 2017b), self-initiated work goal is a new career-related stressor identified by this study.

The discussion below comprises two parts. First, it briefly reviews previous studies related to perceived competency mismatch. It then elaborates on self-initiated work goal as an emerging career-related stressor by drawing on the literature of career goal-performance discrepancy and job crafting.

7.1.4.1 Negative career-related stressors

The existing studies of career-related stressors cluster around those negative experiences, and studies mainly focus on two demographic groups: students and working professionals. The student group, because they are at a career stage of growth or exploration (Super, 1980), prior stress research primarily concentrates on difficulties of career decision-making or career indecision. For example, Larson et al. (1994) designed a 21-item inventory called Subjective Career Distress and Obstacles, to examine negative affect related to career indecision. A sample item for assessing career-related stress is: “I often feel down or depressed about selecting a major or career” (Larson et al., 1994, p. 96). In a similar vein, the career-related stress inventory devised by B. Y. Choi et al. (2011) has been used to measure the level of anxiety and frustration regarding career decision-making. A sample survey question asks the extent to which “I feel frustrated because I do not know what I want to do in the future” (B. Y. Choi et al., 2011, p. 572). In comparison, this study focuses on Chinese senior executives whose careers have reached an establishment or maintenance stage. They tend to be more concerned with career advancement and satisfaction rather than selecting a proper career path (Burke, 1988).

The other stream of previous research has explored what makes working professionals stressed about their careers. By interviewing flight attendants, P. Yang and Yang (2019) identified two career-related stressors, comprising career orientation and career balance. While career orientation refers to the mismatch between personal characteristics (e.g. interest and competency) and a current job, career balance is concerned with a lack of time for personal activities due to excessive job demands. In addition to these two stressors, in a study of nurses, P. Yang (2017b) incorporated career prospects (e.g. on-

the-job training, performance appraisal, and career advancement) and interpersonal interactions to capture a more holistic picture of career-related stress. Furthermore, some scholars also note that a career transition such as changing jobs or retiring is a salient stressor (Burke, 1988; Pica et al., 2019).

In line with the research of working professionals, this study also identified perceived competency mismatch as a stressor (P. Yang, 2017b; P. Yang & Yang, 2019). It is not surprising because senior executives are expected to be highly competent in various aspects, such as professional knowledge and communication skills (Birkinshaw et al., 2017; Greve & Mitsuhashi, 2007). The findings of this study correspond to previous research in that a perceived lack of competency is positively related to psychological strain such as anxiety and frustration (S. Hu et al., 2018b).

7.1.4.2 Self-initiated work goals as a positive career-related stressor

This study has revealed that self-initiated work goals beyond job requirements and shaped by career aspirations are evident amongst Chinese senior executives. According to the theory of career goal-performance discrepancy, people can encounter a positive or negative appraisal of career goal-performance discrepancy (Creed et al., 2017). A *negative goal-performance discrepancy* refers to “a gap between what is required to achieve the goal and the current-appraised progress”, whereas a *positive goal performance discrepancy* describes the situation “when individuals are ahead in their progress towards their goal” (Creed et al., 2017, p. 80). People who experience a negative career discrepancy can adapt to the situation by embracing a less challenging goal, or by increasing their effort to pursue it, or do both. On the contrary, people who encounter a positive career discrepancy may shift to a more challenging goal or reduce their effort (Creed et al., 2017). W. Chen and Anirban (2012) find that both intrinsic and extrinsic motives can cause an upward revision of goal (i.e. setting a more challenging goal). Similarly, this study found that Chinese senior executives who have both intrinsic (e.g. a sense of achievement or a more fulfilling life) and extrinsic motives (e.g. better future employability and financial rewards) impose challenging work goals on themselves, such as taking over a leadership role and pushing for internationalisation. Nonetheless, research shows that people with high occupation-orientation (i.e. to construct career options) and high self-orientation (i.e. to grow as a person) are positively associated with burnout and depression (Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 2004). Thus, although self-initiated work

goals can be appraised positively as a challenge by Chinese senior executives, they may have some negative impacts on their well-being.

Prior research has only investigated the impact of negative appraisal of career goal-performance discrepancy on stress (Creed et al., 2017). Thus, there is a lack of empirical research on positive appraisal of career goal-performance discrepancy and its relationship with stress. However, there is a large body of literature about job crafting and new studies have shown the detrimental side of workplace personal initiatives (Bolino et al., 2010; Drift, 2019). The following discussion bridges the career literature with job crafting literature so as to illustrate how a self-initiated work goal that is driven by career ambition can produce work stress. Figure 7.4 illustrates the mechanism of self-initiated work goals as a stressor.

Figure 7.4: Model of self-initiated work goals



Job crafting refers to self-initiated proactive behaviours of revising an incumbent's job tasks or characteristics in order to promote a better fit between the incumbent and the job in accordance to his or her own preferences, value, and skills (Tims et al., 2012). Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) assert that an individual orientation towards a job can discourage or encourage job crafting. They argue that job crafting is motivated by three basic human needs, including a need for control over job and work meaning, a need for positive self-image, and a need for human connection with others. Although job crafting is not directly driven by career motive, the relationship between the three basic human needs and job crafting is mediated by individual orientation towards work (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). That is, people who only see a job as a means of living tend to do what is required by the job. In contrast, people who have a higher motive, such as pursuing a prestigious career or responding to a calling, are usually enthusiastic about crafting their jobs (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

Although major job crafting behaviours include changing task boundaries by doing fewer, more, or different tasks (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), Chinese senior executives who set self-initiating work goals tend not to do fewer but to do more by creating new job tasks. Tims et al. (2012) show that job crafting is associated with more challenging job demands. A meta-analysis shows that previous studies have generally found a positive relationship between occupational well-being and job crafting since job crafting can increase person-job fit (Rudolph et al., 2017). However, some scholars hold a different view. For instance, Drift (2019) discovered a positive correlation between personal initiatives and time pressure. Other scholars have also pointed out that proactive job behaviours can create discontent or even resentment in colleagues due to fear of change and negative impressions of self-serving and failing to perform formally prescribed job duties (Bolino et al., 2010; Fay et al., 1998). Proactive job behaviours can increase workload and responsibilities and entail more communication effort to deal with potential organisational barriers and interpersonal conflicts (Bolino et al., 2010; Fay et al., 1998). This study discovered a similar pattern of adverse work conditions induced by self-initiated work goals.

Achieving self-initiated work goals can be stressful for senior executives given their job characteristics and the scope of job crafting. Based on a qualitative study, Berg et al. (2010) note that although higher-rank employees have more autonomy, paradoxically autonomy can also cause ambiguity related to knowing when they can craft their jobs and when they should focus on achieving prescribed end goals. Moreover, higher-rank employees have higher levels of job interdependence, meaning that their job crafting may require a higher level of cooperation with others (Berg et al., 2010). Lastly, higher-rank employees are in the “public organisational eye”. This means that doing something that deviates from their formal role prescription can be sensitive (Berg et al., 2010). For these reasons, higher-rank employees can become more self-dependent in job crafting, such as sacrificing their private time to engage in extra work and preferring not to encroach on colleagues (Berg et al., 2010). Additionally, Dierdorff and Jensen (2018) found that a moderate-level of job crafting is most likely to provoke a negative impression of performance effectiveness amongst colleagues when compared with low- and high-level job crafting. This is probably because implementing a low-level of job crafting is less visible and a high-level of job crafting entails others’ consensus before it can be

implemented. Hence, in these two extreme scenarios, job crafting only has a mild effect on the negative impression perceived by others. In the present study, self-initiated work goals engaged by Chinese senior executives tended to be highly visible and require considerable organisational resources and coordination (e.g. taking over a leadership role or pushing for IPO). Therefore, the process of smoothing out opposition, bearing rumours, and cultivating consensus can be taxing. For example, in order to get the approval for taking over a leadership role in a poorly performing business, it was necessary for the senior executive to spend time on market research and persuading key stakeholders to give their support.

In summary, this analysis has shown that while perceived competency mismatch is in line with prior research which disproportionally focuses on negative career-related encounters, the present study extends the work stress literature by showing a trajectory of positive appraisal of career goal-performance discrepancy. Chinese senior executives set new goals for their career advancement and transform their career goals into their jobs. The new challenging work goals beyond job requirements are thus self-initiated to benefit their career advancement. However, it is not easy to achieve the self-initiated work goals because they may require extra organisational resources, create more workload and responsibilities, and elicit more interpersonal conflicts.

7.1.5 Conclusion

Four key findings related to work stressors have been discussed in this chapter. Firstly, uncertainty about job performance is a salient work stressor for Chinese senior executives because of the scope of their responsibilities and the environmental uncertainty inside and outside of their organisations. Secondly, political-business role conflict appears to be a particular stressor derived from the strengthened political movement of party-building initiated by the CCP in China. Thirdly, stress related to workplace interpersonal issues does not merely come from interpersonal conflicts but also from challenges to maintain harmony, a stressor that has been largely overlooked by prior research. Fourthly, prior research of career-related stress has mostly examined negative career experiences such as barriers to career advancement and perceived mismatch of competency, whereas this study found that Chinese senior executives are prone to create challenging work goals for themselves despite not being required to do so by their organisations. Although the Chinese senior executives interviewed in this study also reported some other common

stressors in the literature, this study makes an original contribution to knowledge by identifying the above new stressors. These stressors are influenced by the Chinese context, which will be discussed together with coping strategies in section 7.3. Before that, the next section directs our attention to coping.

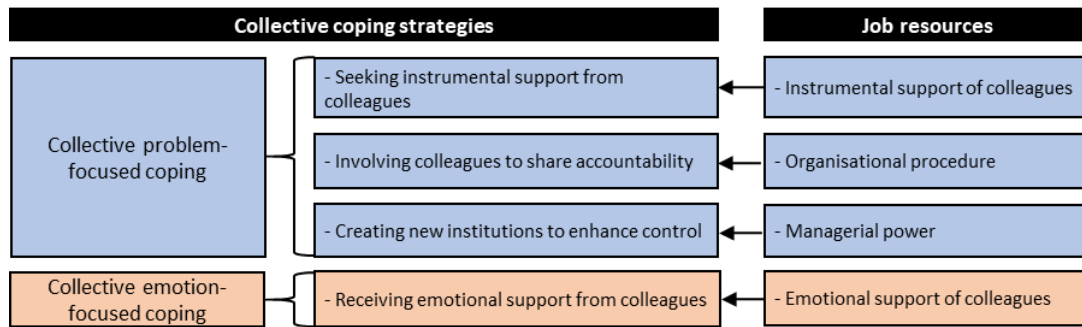
7.2 Coping

Because work stress can be reduced by coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), this study seeks to answer a second question regarding how Chinese senior executives utilise resources to cope with their work stress. Prior research has mainly focused on individual coping while ignoring collective coping and social coping (e.g. De Clercq, 2019; Rodríguez et al., 2019). While collective coping draws on job resources, social coping is facilitated by social resources. The literature review indicates a need to discriminate these two coping strategies. More specifically, there is a dearth of research investigating the link between coping resources and coping strategies. This is an important theoretical gap because without knowing how resources are transformed into coping strategies, the knowledge of coping is incomplete. This study extends the literature by showing that in the Chinese context, senior executives tend to utilise job and social resources to implement problem-focused coping strategies rather than emotion-focused or meaning-focused coping strategies. In contrast, they actively utilise personal resources to implement problem-focused, emotion-focused, and meaning-focused coping strategies. This comparison indicates that while Chinese senior executives tend to cover their distress in the social domain (both inside and outside of workplace), they strive to remove stressors by engaging others.

7.2.1 Collective coping

As shown by the findings in this study, Chinese senior executives use job resources to control stressful situations rather than manage their emotional distress derived from workplace stressful situations. Figure 7.5 demonstrates this asymmetric pattern of collective coping strategies used by Chinese senior executives.

Figure 7.5: Pattern of collective coping strategies



7.2.1.1 *The dominant role of job resources in problem-focused coping*

With regard to collective problem-focused coping, the findings of this research are generally consistent with previous research, that is, Chinese senior executives are able to obtain instrumental support for addressing work stressors. Yet, this study shows that the Chinese senior executives are able to obtain support from all hierarchical levels (e.g. superiors, peers, and subordinates), whereas Australian managers tend to only receive support horizontally from their peers (Lindorff, 2001). This difference may relate to the cultural difference between the two countries. While Chinese society is more hierarchical and collectivistic, Australia is more egalitarian and individualistic (N. J. Adler & Gunderson, 2008). The Chinese senior executives have fewer difficulties in letting their subordinates share their job pressure. This is evident in research showing that Chinese superiors have the prerogative to deploy subordinates to do unplanned overtime (D. J. Feng & Shi, 2005; Xiao & Cooke, 2012). Additionally, research indicates that the culture of making decisions collectively rather than valuing autonomy facilitates the behaviour of seeking social support (Bardi & Guerra, 2011). In a work environment that values collectivistic interests and respects authority, Chinese senior executives can be more likely to seek advice and support from their superiors.

Another collective problem-focused coping strategy identified in this research is to get someone else to share job responsibilities. A similar strategy called developing a collective responsibility was found by Lansisalmi et al. (2000), but unfortunately there was not much detail in their paper about how this coping strategy was implemented. The Chinese senior executives interviewed in this research shed light on this process. They resorted to some organisational procedures (e.g. collective decision-making, cross-departmental consultation, and employee representatives meeting) for expressing their

concerns and invited others to participate in decision-making. In such a way, they were able to reduce the accountability for negative consequences of decisions. Thus, formal institutions in organisations such as organisational procedures can play an important role in reducing senior executives' stress by diminishing or removing the stressor, such as making a high-stakes decision that may jeopardise interpersonal harmony or affect corporate performance.

Another interesting finding of collective problem-focused coping is that Chinese senior executives were able to create new resources rather than merely utilise existing resources. When they felt the constraint of existing organisational designs or policies (e.g. egalitarian distributions of bonus) in dealing with some stressors (e.g. pressure of increasing revenue), they were able to take initiatives to establish new organisational institutions (e.g. a new policy of merit-based bonus distribution). Previous research has mostly focused on utilising the available resources, whereas this study illuminates a more proactive strategy of coping through creating new coping resources. This is in line with the idea of P. T. P. Wong et al. (2006) that effective coping does not merely count on sufficient resources but also the congruence of resources for managing a particular stressor. They propose a concept called *creative coping*, meaning that "an individual can reduce or remove a stressful situation by transforming and developing existing resources" (P. T. P. Wong et al., 2006, p. 235). Interestingly, to my best knowledge, creative coping has not been examined in empirical studies. A key job resource found in this study that enables creative coping is managerial power. It enables some Chinese senior executives to propose and enact new organisational policies as new resources to overcome some stressors that could not be effectively addressed by the existing organisational policies. Thus, this study provides empirical support for creative coping (P. T. P. Wong et al., 2006).

7.2.1.2 The marginal role of job resources in emotion-focused & meaning-focused coping

The previous section has demonstrated the dominant role of job resources in helping Chinese senior executives address their work stressors through problem-solving, whereas this section shows that the Chinese senior executives seem to restrain themselves from demonstrating distress at the workplace. The findings of this study show that they are prone to minimise the use of collective emotion-focused coping (e.g. talk to a colleague

about their distress) and collective meaning-focused coping (e.g. let a colleague reinterpret a stressful situation). This pattern of coping may be attributed to two reasons. Firstly, a comparison between individual coping and collective coping of Chinese senior executives in this study indicates that they actively employed problem-focused, emotion-focused, and meaning-focused coping in a solitary way. However, only a few used collective emotion-focused coping and only two participants mentioned that colleagues helped them reconstruct the meaning of their adversities. Secondly, Chinese senior executives usually receive emotional support from colleagues passively rather than proactively approaching others at the workplace for venting out their emotions or distress. This asymmetric pattern of collective coping echoes prior research. For example, Lindorff (2001) found that managers in Australia received little emotional support from the workplace, while they mostly sought emotional support from a spouse or partner. Research also shows that senior executives usually perceive a sense of social isolation in organisations (Mueller & Lovell, 2013, 2015).

The asymmetric pattern of collective coping found in this study may be attributed to the job position of senior executives. First of all, Cooper and Quick (2003) add that senior executives' prestige can prevent employees from communicating with them frankly so that they may sense social disconnection with others. Secondly, senior executives can be particularly reluctant to disclose their stress because any sign of weakness may impair their career progression (Rook et al., 2016). Therefore, impression management may distance them from social support at work. Thirdly, the hectic work schedules of senior executives may reduce the opportunity to take a moment off and seek emotional support from others (Kelly et al., 2016). Lastly, because senior executives represent the top management, their personal opinions about organisational issues may create office politics and undercut their reputation.

7.2.2 Social coping

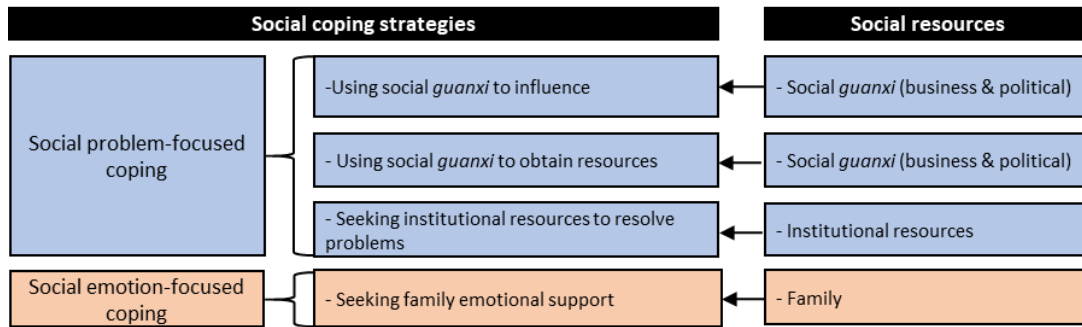
Social coping is not new in the literature but its definition needs some refinement. Through social coping, people obtain social support, a central concept in coping research that refers to others' assistance for coping with stress (Latack & Havlovic, 1992). In a definition provided by C. B. Cox et al. (2015, p. 349), social coping refers to "seeking out other individuals for advice, for instrumental assistance, or for emotional support". The existing definition of social coping is succinct but it lacks a distinction between support

received in the workplace and that obtained outside of the organisation. In other words, in reading empirical papers involving the concept of social coping or social support, we would usually face an ambiguity around who are “other individuals” offering coping support. The traditional definition of social coping contains a mixture of social support, which can be obtained through approaching colleagues (J.-C. Park et al., 2020), family members, or friends (Lindorff, 2001; Mansour & Tremblay, 2016). However, the foundation of providing support amongst these relationships varies. While colleagues can provide social support based on affective motivations, it is also plausible that social support by colleagues is driven by work obligations. Unfortunately, this difference is seldom made clear in research (e.g. Dawson et al., 2016; Gray-Stanley & Muramatsu, 2011). In contrast, social support offered by friends and family members tends to be based on interpersonal relationships or kinship. Therefore, there is a need to differentiate support made available in the workplace and that provided in outside the domain of the workplace.

This research indicates that there is a range of resources provided by external individuals or organisations that Chinese senior executives utilise to cope with their work stress. Social coping is defined here as attempts to resolve problems or manage emotions emanating from work stressors by seeking and utilising resources outside of the workplace, including social guanxi, institutional resources, and family support.

Previous research has failed to fully consider the utilisation of social resources (being external to organisations) for coping with work stress. The concept of social coping is refined in this study to fill this important gap in the literature. The following sections discuss how social guanxi, institutional resources, and family support can assist Chinese senior executives’ social coping. In a general sense, as indicated by Figure 7.6, the pattern of social coping strategies used by Chinese senior executives is asymmetric with more problem-focused coping strategies rather than emotion-focused coping strategies.

Figure 7.6: Pattern of social coping strategies



7.2.2.1 The dominant role of social *guanxi* in problem-focused coping

Guanxi is an intricate concept imbued with Confucianism (So & Walker, 2006). In a simple literal translation, it refers to relationship or connection in English but scholars have generally agreed that *guanxi* is an distinct concept involving an indigenous structure of meanings within Chinese societies (e.g. Burt & Burzynska, 2017; Su et al., 2017). *Guanxi* can contain three basic dimensions, encompassing *ganqing*, *renqing*, and *xinren* (D. A. Yen et al., 2011). Amidst the three dimensions, *ganqing* implies emotional connection or affection (X.-P. Chen & Chen, 2004), a word that is usually used to describe the quality of relationship in China (D. A. Yen et al., 2011). *Renqing* denotes reciprocity but it does not require immediate payback (C. L. Wang, 2007). Thus, investing in *guanxi* is like purchasing an insurance in which payback or protection can be stored and returned at the right time (T. C. E. Cheng et al., 2012). *Xinren* means trust and reliance based on the history or reputation in terms of fulfilling promises (D. A. Yen et al., 2011). Since *guanxi* contains affection (*ganqing*), reciprocal obligation (*renqing*), and trust (*xinren*), these qualities together create strong interpersonal connection with great potential for providing assistance.

Social *guanxi* is an aggregate term for government *guanxi* and business *guanxi*, two very important social ties for doing business in China (Y. Luo et al., 2012; Su et al., 2017). Business *guanxi* usually refers to the external business network of various stakeholders, such as customers, suppliers, distributors, and competitors (H. F. L. Chung, 2011; Su et al., 2017). But business *guanxi* can have a very broad scope, including other *guanxi* bases not necessarily linked to the context of doing business. For example, classmates, former colleagues, acquaintances in the same industry, and friends are common *guanxi* bases for conducting businesses in China (So & Walker, 2006). Thus, an extended social network

can be utilised as business guanxi in China. On the other hand, government guanxi means personal ties with government officials, which is treated as a distinct guanxi tie in the literature (Su et al., 2017).

A considerable number of studies have considered social guanxi as a key strategic mechanism for securing corporate performance in China (e.g. Chu et al., 2020; Y. Luo et al., 2012), whereas it has not yet been formally conceptualised as an individual coping resource for dealing with work stress. For example, Su et al. (2017) found that new venture performance was positively related to social guanxi possessed by company managers. Similarly, T. C. E. Cheng et al. (2012) also note that when there was a perceived supply risk, purchasing companies would develop and use guanxi with key suppliers to reduce uncertainty of supply. It is worth noting that there are two very recent studies seeing social guanxi as a coping strategy (Chu et al., 2020; Chu et al., 2019), but their focus still remains at the firm level. That is, guanxi can effectively reduce environmental uncertainty and dependency in supply chains for companies. Surprisingly, there is no direct evidence in the literature so far showing that social guanxi is a coping resource for individuals.

A small amount of emerging research has shown some beneficial effects of workplace guanxi (i.e. between superiors and subordinates) for individuals (e.g. Q. Hu et al., 2016b; Tang et al., 2020). For example, employees can utilise their political skills to build guanxi with supervisors who can in turn help lessen employees' work-family conflict (Tang et al., 2020). In the same vein, supervisor-subordinate guanxi established by social interactions outside of the workplace is instrumental in boosting job resources, such as autonomy, support, and development at work (Guan & Frenkel, 2019). While these studies provide preliminary evidence for the possibility that workplace guanxi may help cope with work stress, we know little about whether social guanxi has this function until this study.

This study identifies two problem-focused coping strategies facilitated by social guanxi. The first strategy is to use social guanxi to influence a stressful situation. This is consistent with social capital theory in that guanxi contains a power of influence (P. S. Adler & Kwon, 2002). Social capital theory posits that people are bound with obligations and expectations in their social networks, meaning that if person A does something for person

B, there will be an expectation of reciprocity in A and an obligations of reciprocity in B (Coleman, 1988). As guanxi is not just built upon reciprocity but also trust and affection (D. A. Yen et al., 2011), the power of influence based on guanxi can be more substantial. This study has revealed that some Chinese senior executives use their social guanxi to reduce the tension with clients when serious commercial incidents happen. Smoothing out ripples in the client relationship through guanxi can help ease the pressure of performance uncertainty. Likewise, empirical research by T. C. E. Cheng et al. (2012) has shown that guanxi can greatly safeguard the effectiveness of communication in buyer-supplier relationship when there is a supply chain risk.

The other problem-focused coping strategy is that social guanxi enhances the ability to acquire the needed external resource that is critical for overcoming a stressful situation. Social capital theory postulates that social relations can provide a broader source of information and increase the timeliness, relevance, and accuracy of information (P. S. Adler & Kwon, 2002). For instance, CEOs who hold external directorships in trade associations can have better access to a variety of types of information, such as loan information, directions of regulatory changes, the true intention of new government policies, rival's innovation and personnel changes, and opinions of other CEOs and government officials (J.-F. Yen et al., 2014). However, the sort of resource provided by social guanxi is not confined to information. This study shows that social guanxi can also provide professional advice, better legal services, capital, technological aid, and even access to the police force. These guanxi-related resources can help Chinese senior executives deal with their work stressors effectively.

Utilising social guanxi may be particularly important for senior executives because of their managerial responsibilities. Firstly, they play a key role in boundary spanning in the organisational and environmental interface (Heavey & Simsek, 2015). An important managerial responsibility is to unify divergent opinions between internal and external stakeholders (Birkinshaw et al., 2017). Social guanxi can be a critical resource for influencing external stakeholders, such as a bureaucratic government agency or an angry client. Besides, they need to facilitate strategic renewal and innovation by updating knowledge, obtaining new information, and comparing different perspectives to address their cognitive limitation (Lotte et al., 2015). As a result, they depend on external resources to improve the effectiveness of their business decisions.

The critical role of social guanxi may also be attributed to the social environment of China where informal channels to acquiring resources are still prevalent. A meta-analysis has indicated that business and government ties play a more important role in fortifying organisational performance for organisations in mainland China than for those in overseas China, such as Hong Kong and Taiwan (Y. Luo et al., 2012). The value of exercising guanxi to obtain key resources is more salient in mainland China because institutional transparency and legal protection business activities are under development (F. F. Gu et al., 2008; Y. Luo et al., 2012). In short, social guanxi is a powerful coping resource for Chinese senior executives to implement social problem-focused coping strategies.

7.2.2.2 The dominant role of institutional resources in problem-focused coping

Institutional resources in the coping context can mean different things. An institutional resource is sometimes conceptualised as formal support offered in the workplace, such as training, established guidelines, supporting personnel, and debriefing (Duncan et al., 2018). Nevertheless, institutional resources in this study refer to formal aids provided by external organisations or their members under some established rules and procedures. Aldwin (2007) argues that the efficacy of coping can hinge on the institutional resources embedded in wider social environment, such as the legal system, rituals, and religious or professional counselling.

While social guanxi represents an informal, personal channel for acquiring resources, institutional resources exemplify the importance of formal, publicly available resources for coping. Although guanxi is likely to continue to influence business activities in China, its value decreases when the institutional environment matures at a certain stage where market exchange relies more on rules and laws (Y. Luo et al., 2012; Oppen et al., 2017). The combination of social guanxi and institutional resources for coping reflects the transitional nature of the Chinese economy (Horak & Restel, 2016).

The existing literature on institutional resources mainly focuses on developmental issues, such as those associated with children and adolescents (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000), poverty (O'Brien Caughy et al., 1999), and drought and food security (Tortajada et al., 2017). For example, Habarth et al. (2009) found that better access to institutional resources such as after-school childcare, medical and mental care, adequate housing, and policy protection, are positively related to problem-focused coping amongst low-income

women. Without a doubt, social problems require systemic coping resources provided by government agencies and other institutions. However, it remains relatively unclear as to what extent the wider society provides institutional support for coping with work stress. This study adds to the literature by showing that coping with work stress can be assisted by various institutional resources, including consultation services provided by government agencies, free human resources offered by university internship programmes, psychological counselling services, part-time courses provided by universities, and legal protection provided by police stations.

Research findings about institutional resources that are used to cope with work stress are only piecemeal. For example, Kelly et al. (2016) discovered that nurse directors use professional coaching and mentoring services to maintain emotional resilience. Furthermore, Y. Chung et al. (2009) found that gay and lesbian workers approach media and take legal actions to stop discriminatory acts in the workplace as a strategy to address this stressor. However, it is interesting to note that only one Chinese senior executive in this study used a psychological counselling service to regulate her emotions. In the majority of cases, institutional resources are used for problem-solving. This is probably because psychological counselling services are in their infancy in China. According to Mental Health Atlas 2017 by the WHO (2018), the number of psychiatrists per 100,000 people in China is 2.2, which is relatively low when compared with 10.5 in U.S.

However, using institutional resources is only one way of coping, whereas the use of personal and job resources is more prevalent (Y. Chung et al., 2009; Kelly et al., 2016). For instance, as shown by Y. Chung et al. (2009), in coping with the discrimination of sexual orientation at work, the use of social interventions is merely marginal. In comparison, victims are more likely to use organisational interventions (e.g. human resource management and supervisor assistance) and personal endurance (e.g. silence and avoidance). This implies that when job and personal resources are insufficient for coping, individuals may seek out resources outside of their workplaces. This is well exemplified in the current study. An example of social problem-focused coping assisted by institutional resources is when a Chinese senior executive has to call in the police force to control the violent behaviours of creditors when his negotiation and company security guards are unable to manage the situation. Similarly, another Chinese senior executive resorts to professional counselling service at her own cost as there is no psychological

intervention available in her workplace. In a nutshell, institutional resources are an important complementary resource for coping with work stress through problem-focused coping strategies.

7.2.2.3 The marginal role of family support in emotion-focused coping

Family support is an important resource for coping with work stress (Huffman et al., 2015; Mansour & Tremblay, 2016). In a study of coping with the loss of a job, Huffman et al. (2015) found that family can provide a sense of trust and belonging as well as assistance in the form of reemployment via family-related social contacts. By and large, family support is a kind of social support consisting of instrumental and emotional support (Russo et al., 2015). Family emotional support refers to anything done by family members to make the focal person feel cared, whereas instrumental support means tangible assistance performed by the family members to reduce the burden of daily domestic tasks (Adams et al., 1996).

Only family emotional support is reported in this study, but interestingly, male and female Chinese senior executives seem to use family emotional support differently. Male Chinese senior executives are likely to not discuss their work stressors with family members. Instead, they relax through enjoying family interactions, such as playing with children. This is similar to a recent study of palliative care workers in South Africa showing that “participants avoided discussing details of their work with family and friends in an effort to protect them from becoming upset and emotionally involved” (Smith et al., 2020, p. 432). In contrast, a female senior executive in this study talks to her husband about her conflict with a colleague as a way to release negative emotions. This resonates with previous research that has shown a negative crossover effect of work-family conflicts on life satisfaction taking place unidirectionally from wives to husbands but not vice versa in Chinese families (M. Zhang et al., 2013). M. Zhang et al. (2013) explain that views of traditional gender roles are still pervasive in contemporary China where husbands are breadwinners and wives take up more domestic duties. This is exemplified by the fact that the husband-wife gap of monetary contribution to family continued to widen from 1988 to 1999 (H. Li et al., 2006).

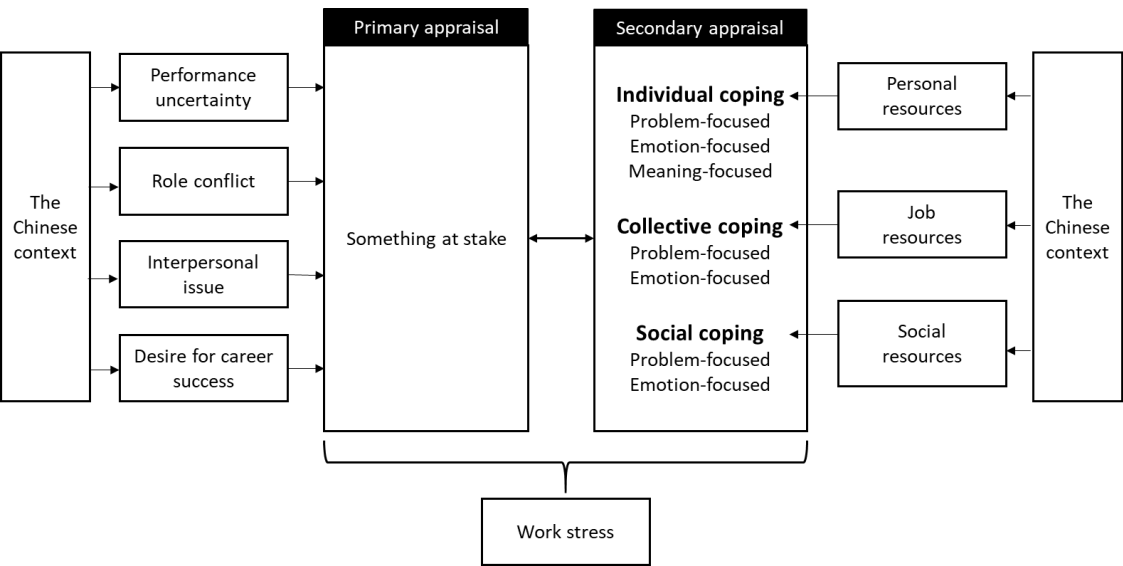
In summary, this section has discussed social coping as an important overarching coping strategy drawing on three major external coping resources, including social guanxi,

institutional resources, and family support. While family support for coping has been intensively studied by previous research, social guanxi and institutional resources are important resources that have been overlooked. The study contributes to the literature by showing the linkage of these social resources and strategies of social coping.

7.3 Contextualising Chinese senior executives' work stress

This study explores the experience of work stress amongst Chinese senior executives. Based on cognitive appraisal theory, the experience of stress involves two components. The first is stressor also known as the situational antecedent that instigates the primary appraisal within which the person perceives the situation as problematic because it threatens, challenges, or has already caused some loss to the person. The second component is coping, which occurs after the secondary appraisal within which the person evaluates resources that are suitable for coping with stress. The more flexibly the person can employ resources to cope, the more effective the coping outcome. As the person becomes more confident about his or her efficacy in coping, he or she is more likely to restore a psychological equilibrium and withdraw from the primary appraisal. This study applies the framework of cognitive appraisal theory into the investigation of Chinese senior executives' work stress and discovers new insights into work stressors and coping strategies. Figure 7.7 shows the structure of knowledge added by this study.

Figure 7.7: Contextualising of work stressors and coping strategies in the Chinese context



Organisational scholars suggest that different cultural contexts can help advance theoretical development (Barkema et al., 2015; C. Yao et al., 2020). This study contextualises cognitive appraisal theory in the Chinese context (theories *in context*) (Whetten, 2009) by discovering new dimensions of work stressors and expanding our understanding of the utilisation of coping resources in the collective and social coping frameworks. It achieves what Barkema et al. (2015) call “construct infusion” where nuanced or new content of existing concepts or theories are discovered in the Eastern context. As illustrated by Figure 7.1, what Chinese senior executives perceive to be stressful and how they utilise resources to cope are largely determined by the social context rather than purely by the generic workplace. The following sections will explicate these new insights.

7.3.1 Work stressors created by social context

This study revealed that the Chinese context play a significant role in triggering the primary appraisal of Chinese senior executives. First, it shows that Chinese senior executives face a series of organisational and environmental factors, in part particular to the Chinese context, making their job performance unpredictable. Uncertainty has been discussed by other researchers as a contributing factor to work stress (Beehr, 1998; DeGhetto et al., 2017). This study extends that literature by confirming its salience within the Chinese context. This study found that performance uncertainty is borne out of several organisational and environmental factors, including role ambiguity, role overload, organisational politics, poor performing subordinates, challenging regulatory environment, competitive business environment, demanding external stakeholders, and adverse natural conditions. Although these factors are not unique to China, some of them are closely related to the transitional position of the Chinese economy. For example, staff incompetence and organisational politics appear to be serious issues for many senior executives interviewed. Some participants attribute these problems to the ideology of socialistic egalitarianism or guanxi-based recruitment. They believe that through the influence of socialistic egalitarianism, their employees lack motivation to improve their skills and knowledge. Also, according to the participants, guanxi-based recruitment results in less effective selection practices. These factors together explain the perceived problem of poor performing subordinates, which causes the undermining of performance that is critical in the deepening economic reforms in China.

Furthermore, the Chinese regulatory environment is constantly changing. Several critical incidents in this research show rigid enforcement of new environmental protection regulations by local governments, including calling off land reclamation, protecting environmental reservation areas, and closely monitoring industrial pollution. In comparison, not long ago, some researchers claimed that local governments in China were reluctant to implement environmental protection regulations seriously because government officials' evaluation was mainly based on economic indicators (Chan & Peng, 2011). This stark comparison of findings in this study with the literature indicates the fast-evolving regulatory environment in China. The rapid transition from a society that relies on informal relations, egalitarian distribution of wealth, and fast GDP growth to a society that values rules, competitiveness, and quality of economic development seems to be escalating the challenge of maintaining stability and predictability. After all, reform in a transitional economy means constant changes. Following the inertia in social change, performance uncertainty is a salient work stressor for Chinese senior executives.

Secondly, the Chinese context enriches our understanding of role conflict by showing that the party office embedded in Chinese organisations demands party-building activities during office hours. This study shows that Chinese senior executives in SOEs and MOEs face political-business role conflict, characterised by a constraint of time because of having to attend party-building and attend to business activities. This is a structural stressor due to the importance of political capital in maintaining and advancing careers on the one party-ruling country (Q. Xin et al., 2019). This high level of political embeddedness of the single ruling party in SOEs is distinctive to the Chinese context. For example, after the transition from communism to democracy, Poland whose communist party previously appointed key positions in SOEs, now relies on a multiparty system within which the decision on key appointments is based on governing coalitions (O'Dwyer, 2004). In his study of partisan affiliation and managerial survival in Austria, Ennser-Jedenastik (2014, p. 148) found that "managers thus do not benefit from being affiliated with any government party but only have longer tenures if they are affiliated with the party who controls the ministry responsible for the respective corporation". As can be seen, although partisan affiliation can influence the appointment of key managerial positions in SOEs in democratic countries like Austria and Poland, the effect tends to be contingent on the power of political parties elected in the parliament. The Chinese

political system sits in stark contrast, as the CCP is the only legitimate political party in the country. As a result, complying with party rules is an important prerequisite for maintaining key managerial positions in Chinese SOEs and MOEs. For example, research shows that over 92% of CEOs of large industrial SOEs are CCP members (L.-W. Lin, 2017). The absolute dominant position of the CCP in China therefore is a very important context for understanding the work stress of Chinese senior executives. While previous research has mainly examined role conflict within a business context, this study extends our understanding by identifying a new dimension of role conflict where business and political obligations are combined.

Thirdly, the literature of work stress traditionally views workplace interpersonal issues from a conflict perspective, whereas the Chinese context presents the challenge to maintain harmony from a different perspective. The importance of harmony in Chinese society is usually interpreted as the result of the influence of traditional philosophies such as Daoism and Confucianism (L.-L. Huang, 2016; C. Li, 2014). The CCP's political goal of building a "harmonious society" also fortifies the importance of harmony (C. Yao et al., 2020). Q. Xin et al. (2019) found that opinion polls are critical for the promotion of SOE managers in China because the organisation department of the CCP conducts surveys and votes to facilitate its decision on important promotions. Thus, the importance of interpersonal harmony is strengthened by both traditional culture and modern institutions in SOEs and MOEs. While social objectives such as maintaining stable employment and employee welfare are of importance in the traditional state economy and adhere to the value of harmony, increasingly important economic objectives such as efficiency and revenue have necessitated frequent reforms and organisational changes (F. Liu & Zhang, 2018; Q. Xin et al., 2019). This transitional context of the Chinese economy has brought about disharmony and the pressure of managing the transition. Accomplishing economic objectives without scarifying some social objectives can be very challenging. For instance, maintaining the employment of superfluous employees can undermine the economic performance of a company. Thus, how to maintain harmony while performing managerial duties is an emerging challenge for Chinese senior executives. While previous research has predominantly examined interpersonal conflict as the trigger of primary appraisal because it threatens one's goals, this study provides a

new insight in relation to interpersonal issues by showing the importance of interpersonal harmony and the difficulty of maintaining it in the transition of Chinese economy.

Fourthly, while previous research of career-related stress has mainly focused on negative, confining career encounters, such as perceived incompetency, career indecision, job insecurity, and career plateauing (B. Y. Choi et al., 2011; Cooper et al., 2001; Larson et al., 1994; P. Yang, 2017b; P. Yang & Yang, 2019), this study enriches our understanding of career-related stressors by incorporating a positive appraisal of situation, where Chinese senior executives are able to identify challenging work goals beyond the requirement of organisations to satisfy their needs for career advancement. The Chinese context may have intensified the concern about career success. Scholars have pointed out that stages of career development in China are culturally prescribed by reference to Confucian timing (C. Yao et al., 2020). The Analects of Confucius (*lun yu*) contains a famous passage related to career and timing (Ni, 2017, p. 97):

The Master said, “At fifteen, I had my heart-mind set on learning. At thirty, I was able to take my stand. At forty, I had no more perplexities. At fifty, I knew the mandate of heaven (*tian ming* 天命). At sixty, my ears were attuned. At seventy, I could follow my heart’s wishes without overstepping the boundaries”.

According to Confucius, thirty is an important point of life (or *san shi er li*, an idiom from Confucius). While it traditionally denotes that people at thirty should have established a stable belief system from a Confucian perspective, it has evolved secular meaning in modern China pertaining to economic independence, establishment of career, starting a family, and life stability at this age (K. Y. He, 2016). To some extent, due to this ingrained Confucian influence, Chinese people can bear a great pressure in pursuing career success because of the rigidly prescribed deadlines of career development stages.

The urgency of timing for establishing a career is also related to the institutional context of the Chinese labour market. Due to the lack of legal protection, age discrimination appears to be common in the Chinese labour market (Rong, 2019). Research has shown that 24% of advertised jobs have an age requirement and the mean of required age is 30.6 years (Kuhn & Shen, 2013). This institutional environment seems to coincidentally reflect the social expectation of *san shi er li* - that people at the age of thirty should have entered

a stable career trajectory. Additionally, mandatory retirement ages in China are relatively young at 60 years for males and 55 for females (Q. Feng et al., 2019). Notably, Chinese employees have a shorter career life-span when compared with many Western countries from the institutional perspective. Therefore, the Chinese institutional environment can heighten the fear of missing an opportunity for fulfilling a career aspiration, especially at mid-age. Lastly, ideas of lifetime employability instead of lifetime employment (what used to be referred to as the “iron rice bowl”) (X. Liu et al., 2019), has become more prominent for Chinese people. Redundancy resulting from mergers and acquisitions is common in the Chinese private sector (C.-Q. Lu et al., 2009). Chinese SOEs also underwent major reforms, resulting in millions of redundant employees in the 1990s (Chan & Peng, 2011). By proactively crafting a more competitive career profile through some self-initiated work goals, the Chinese senior executives can improve their competitiveness in the labour market.

In short, this study shows that the source of work stress for Chinese senior executives is inseparable from the transitional economy of China, where economic reforms, traditional values, political demands, and social changes create a dynamic experience of pressure in meeting many contradictory social expectations.

7.3.2 Suppressing the expression of distress in the social domain

Although emotional suppression is found in other cultures, this characteristic is more salient in the Chinese context (Butler et al., 2007; Huwaë & Schaafsma, 2018). Consistently, this study has shown that Chinese senior executives tend to refrain from expressing and communicating their emotional distress with other people, no matter within or outside of the workplace. Instead, they are inclined to come to terms with their stress by solitarily regulating their emotions or reinterpreting the meaning of their adversities.

These findings enrich the model of cognitive appraisal theory by showing that the use of job and social resources is influenced by social context. Although some Chinese senior executives in this study chose to relax in the family setting, most of them consciously avoided talking about their work at home and concealed work-related negative emotions. Similarly, at the workplace, they seldom took an initiative to reveal their distress to colleagues. This pattern of coping is in line with prior research of emotion management

in the Chinese workplace where keeping emotionally neutral and minimising the communication of emotions are the workplace norms for Chinese people (Y. Guo, 2019). Cross cultural research also shows that Chinese participants are more likely to suppress negative emotions in their interactions with both close and non-close others than Dutch and Moluccan participants (Huwaë & Schaafsma, 2018). Another study showed that women with bicultural Asian-European values are more likely to suppress emotions than women with predominantly European values (Butler et al., 2007). The precaution in expressing personal emotions is likely to be culturally rooted as other research shows that even in a psychological counselling setting where emotional expression is expected, Chinese college students do not easily share their emotions (Y. Zhang et al., 2016). Many scholars attribute protecting interpersonal harmony as the main reason as to why Chinese people dislike revealing their negative emotions (Butler et al., 2007; Huwaë & Schaafsma, 2018). Y. Guo (2019, p. 1198) also found that the norms of not expressing and communicating emotions in the Chinese workplace is associated with “relationship maintenance (e.g. network management), face-work (e.g. being respectful) and cultural values (e.g. low key)”. An additional factor to consider is that emotional expression and communicating emotions in the Chinese workplace can be considered immature and can be seen to be outsider behaviour (Y. Guo, 2019). Therefore, maintaining emotional neutrality is not only driven by the social expectation of maintaining harmony but also considered a culturally situated competency desired in the Chinese workplace.

However, research shows that emotional suppression is not a healthy way of coping. It has been found that suppressing emotions can impoverish one’s social network and erode social support, the result of which can create more negative emotions and a higher risk of depressive symptoms (Gross & John, 2003; John & Gross, 2004). As emotional expression and responsiveness are the key to cultivating social support, a reduction in emotional expression can weaken the closeness with others and their social support (Gross, 2002). A cross-cultural study shows that there is a larger discrepancy of self-rated and peer-rated distress amongst Asian Americans than amongst their Caucasian counterparts, suggesting that Asian people are more likely to conceal their emotions in social interactions (Okazaki, 2002). If the person is suffering from a very high level of stress but reluctant to reveal and talk about their distress, it would be difficult for the workplace or others to intervene in the situation. Therefore, the habitual suppression of

emotions may undercut the benefit of managing stress collectively or socially. Research has shown that social support from family and friends is positively related to problem-focused coping, which can alleviate the impact of stress on well-being (Chao, 2011).

It is worth noting that because research on collective coping and social coping within the context of work stress was scarce in the past, the effectiveness of collective/social emotion-focused and meaning-focused coping lacks strong evidence. However, research on coping flexibility has proved that effective coping hinges on the flexibility of using different coping strategies to meet the demands of different stressful situations (Freire et al., 2018; Kato, 2020). Emotion-focused coping and meaning-focused coping have their own place in assisting coping. Firstly, emotion-focused coping becomes dominant when problem-focused coping is deemed to be ineffective (Lazarus, 1999). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) argue that emotion-focused coping can also facilitate problem-focused coping by regulating emotional distress, so the person can restore his or her energy and confidence to deal with the problem causing stress. Eatough and Chang (2018) add that discharging emotions can lessen the intensity of negative feelings, rectify interpersonal misunderstandings, and facilitate social support. Their research shows that emotional expression can reduce work-related depressive mood when the employee has little control in addressing the stressor (Eatough & Chang, 2018). Secondly, meaning-focused coping can cultivate positive emotions by reappraising a stressor as less intimidating, and sustaining problem-focused and emotion-focused coping when these two coping strategies fail to alleviate stress at the first place (Folkman, 1997). Researchers note that people tend to resort to meaning-focused coping when the stressor is severe and uncontrollable (Dewe & Cooper, 2017). For example, meaning-focused coping was found to be most effective in terms of boosting positive affect and well-being for victims coping with significant loss in a catastrophic earthquake in China (M. Guo et al., 2013). These previous studies suggest that emotion-focused and meaning-focused coping are valuable for restoring one's physical and psychological equilibrium when the stressor is chronic or overwhelming. Thus, if others can assist the person in releasing negative emotions (emotion-focused) or in seeing the stressor from a different perspective (meaning-focused), the person can benefit from these collective or social coping strategies.

Unfortunately, this study indicates that Chinese senior executives were not spontaneous in telling others that "I feel stressed". Although they actively address stressors (problem-

focused coping) by drawing on their own efforts or mobilising others' instrumental support, they appear to be passive in expressing emotional needs or communicating their distress with others. If their stressors can be removed or largely diminished, their work stress can fade away or be contained at a reasonable level. However, their active use of individual emotion-focused coping and individual meaning-focused coping identified in this study indicates that the stressors they encounter are chronic or overwhelming (Folkman, 1997; Lazarus, 1999). The behavioural pattern that Chinese senior executives keep their distress to themselves may send out a misleading message to the workplace, friends, and family that they are doing "all right". Nevertheless, the outwardly calm appearance of Chinese senior executives may not be consistent with how they are actually feeling. The coping flexibility literature has proved that in order to maintain well-being, it is important to be flexible in selecting different coping strategies to address the demands of different stressful situations (Freire et al., 2018; Kato, 2020). The implication of deficit collective and social coping is diminished well-being when their individual coping does not produce the desired effect.

These findings reaffirm the importance of understanding work stress from both stressor and coping perspectives. While some work stressors are chronic or overwhelming, meaning that immediately changing the situation is unrealistic, adaptation to the stressful environment hinges on the person's ability to cope. The social context that discourages sharing emotions with others found in this study points to the critical role that social context plays in determining people's appraisal in terms of how to utilise their job and social resources for coping.

7.3.3 Formal and informal resources for social coping

Research that applies cognitive appraisal theory mostly looks at personal and job resources (Kulik, 2012; Mauno et al., 2013; Van den Brande et al., 2020). While this study confirms the critical role of these two main types of coping resources, it has discovered that social resources outside of the workplace are also important. The Chinese context provides new insights into the relationship between social resources and social coping strategies. The transitional Chinese economy is characterised by the co-existence of ongoing institutional development and the persisting importance of social *guanxi* and family support (Berger et al., 2018; Chu et al., 2019). This study therefore extends the

appraisal of coping resources from personal and job resources to social resources under the framework of cognitive appraisal theory.

As shown by this study, on the one hand, Chinese senior executives draw on formal social institutions, such as free human resources offered by university internship programmes, part-time courses offered by universities, policy consultation services provided by government agencies, and legal protection by police. In the case of the more flexible use of human resources, while Chinese employment used to be assigned by the state and people had little mobility between rural and urban areas before 1980s, the labour market now is highly market-driven, with increased mobility across regions (Meng, 2012). As a result, it is very common for Chinese universities, recruitment agencies, and employers to establish internship programmes (Pan et al., 2018). While students can benefit from internship programmes by increasing their future employability, Xia (2019) notes that some Chinese companies use a large number of interns to reduce labour costs and increase flexibility of hiring. A more marketed-orientated labour market provides an alternative to human resources, although the fairness of pay and working conditions are debatable (Xia, 2019). Furthermore, in line with the literature, this study shows that Chinese senior executives have better access to government information due to the Regulations on Open Government Information (ROGI) taking effect in 2008 (Y. Lu, 2021). The ROGI requires government agencies to disseminate information (e.g. rules, standards, procedures, policies) on their own initiative and to disclose information in response to requests from citizens and organisations (Y. Lu, 2021). For example, the Ministry of Environmental Protection has promulgated specific regulations for local governments to disclose information on “(1) environmental laws, regulations, and standards; (2) allocation of emissions quotas and permits; (3) pollution fees and penalties collected” to name a few (Tan, 2014, p. 39). According to SCPRC (2019), the amended version of ROGI in 2019 stipulates that government agencies should address questions on site immediately if possible. If the government agency is unable to respond immediately, it must respond to the request within 20 business days. Under this improved institutional environment, Chinese senior executives can have better control in terms of managing policy ambiguity related to their business decisions.

On the other hand, the Chinese institutional environment is still relatively underdeveloped and Chinese senior executives appear to be accustomed to using informal, relation-based

resources such as social *guanxi* and family support to cope with work stress. In this study, social *guanxi* mainly helps remove stressors (problem-focused coping), while family support mainly assists with emotion regulation (emotion-focused coping). Even though the Chinese senior executives interviewed are based in Guangdong province - the bridgehead of economic reforms and marketisation in China, social *guanxi* stands firmly as a very important resource for dealing with work stressors. This resonates with the cultural perspective of *guanxi* in that its importance will be perpetuated in Chinese societies (e.g. Hong Kong) regardless of institutional development (So & Walker, 2006). However, some scholars argue that from an institutional perspective, the importance of *guanxi* will decline when the institutional environment becomes more developed (Y. Luo et al., 2012). Taken together, given the cultural characteristic of Chinese society and its current status as a transitional economy, there is no doubt that social *guanxi* is an important social resource for coping.

In addition, family support plays a significant role in helping the Chinese senior executives regulate their emotions. This is in line with research by Xiao and Cooke (2012) who found that Chinese managers and professionals depend on family support to ease work stress. Their study showed that Chinese organisations merely provide materialistic rewards to compensate for overtime but are not in a position to institutionalise work-life balance policies. While these practices have been formalised by laws and organisational policies in advanced Western economies, China is still lacking regulatory and organisational initiatives for managing work-life imbalance (Xiao & Cooke, 2012). This lack of institutional intervention may make family a precious resort for adjusting emotional distress deriving from work. In addition, even though counselling has been introduced to China, counselling has not been widely accepted in China because of the stigma associated with mental disorders (Hou & Naijian, 2007; S. L. Lim et al., 2010; Portnoy, 2013). It is said that “although many people in the cities no longer feel this stigma, they still prefer to ask family or friends for help with life stress rather than approach strangers” (Higgins et al., 2008, p. 105). This explains why family rather than counselling is more commonly noted in this study as a social resource for regulating emotions.

In short, as China continues to become a more market-oriented economy while some traditional beliefs and practices still influence how Chinese senior executives choose to

cope. Both formal social resources (institution-based) and informal social resources (relation-based) as a result play an important role in the ways of social coping. This study has revealed that the application of cognitive appraisal theory to better understand the Chinese workplace should incorporate a broader view of coping resources given the distinctive social context, where coping resources for Chinese senior executives not only contain personal and job resources, but also formal and informal social resources.

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed research findings on work stressors and coping. This study makes contributions to the literature by identifying distinctive work stressors in the Chinese context, enriching our understanding of the prominent situational antecedents to the primary appraisal in the stress process. Firstly, while performance uncertainty is linked with organisational factors in prior research, this study shows that Chinese senior executives suffer from performance uncertainty due to both organisational and environmental factors. Secondly, political-business role conflict is identified as a unique work stressor absent in the work stress literature. Thirdly, while workplace interpersonal issues as a work stressor predominantly focus on interpersonal conflicts, this study has discovered harmony-maintenance challenges as a new dimension. Fourthly, this study reveals that Chinese senior executives can self-initiate challenging work goals for crafting their careers, nevertheless, previous research mainly investigates negative, confining career-related encounters.

As for coping, a central focus of this study is to understand how coping resources are utilised to implement collective and social coping strategies. The study found that job resources and social resources mainly facilitate problem-solving. In contrast, these resources are barely used to address emotional distress. The asymmetric pattern of coping strategies indicates that work stress remains significant for Chinese senior executives as they are incapable of fully utilising job and social resources. This study advances cognitive appraisal theory by unravelling the relationships between coping resources and coping strategies within the framework of collective and social coping.

This chapter has discussed the critical role that the Chinese context plays in shaping the work stressors and how Chinese senior executives cope with them. The study found that the transitional economy, coupled with traditional values gives rise to distinctive stressors

as well as particular ways of utilising coping resources. Drawing on these implications, the theoretical framework of cognitive appraisal theory applied to research in China should incorporate the country's distinctive social context. The next chapter concludes key findings and discusses some practical implications, research limitations, and future research directions.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

Work stress has become a prevalent issue in China along with its drastic social changes and rapid economic development. As work stress research has mainly focused on Western contexts, there is a lack of understanding of work stress in China. For example, the Chinese context differs from Western counterparts in many ways. China is markedly characterised by its one-party ruling system where political participation is formally institutionalised in enterprises with state-owned capital. Also, harmony is not only rooted in traditional Chinese philosophy and culture but also upheld by the government through institutional reinforcements, ranging from a proclaimed social goal to a metric of performance evaluation for cadres. This study aimed to shed light on the contextual understanding of work stress in China by investigating the work stressors as well as coping strategies used by Chinese senior executives. It is important to advance these two specific domains of knowledge as the experience of stress is highly subjective, depending on one's appraisals of stressors and the efficacy of coping (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Since most theories and concepts of work stress and coping are developed in Western contexts, this study adopted an inductive strategy to explore the phenomenon in China. To gain a more contextual understanding, CIT was employed to collect narrative data of stressful encounters (Dewe et al., 2010), which help me to identify work stressors and coping strategies in the Chinese context. This chapter revisits the study's research questions and outlines the key findings. Next, it elucidates the major contributions to knowledge that it makes. After that, it suggests actions that Chinese enterprises and the Chinese government can employ to intervene in the issue of work stress. Lastly, the chapter delineates research limitations and suggests future paths of research.

8.2 Answering the research questions

This study seeks to answer two research questions:

1. *What stressors do Chinese senior executives experience in their work environment?*
2. *How do Chinese senior executives utilise resources to cope with their work stress?*

Guided by phenomenological philosophy, this study investigates the questions through the perspective of Chinese senior executives. The goal of phenomenological research is to synthesise the meanings and essence of human experience through fundamental textural-structural descriptions (Clark, 1994). To this end, the following provides a summary of the Chinese senior executives' experiences in relation to the two research questions, based on thematic analysis of their CIT interview data.

8.2.1 Research question 1.

This study revealed that Chinese senior executives face four main work stressors, including performance uncertainty, role conflicts, workplace interpersonal issues, and desire for career development. Each of these stressors is complex and multidimensional. To a large extent, these stressors strongly resonate with the distinct Chinese cultural and institutional context.

First of all, Chinese senior executives face tremendous pressure because of uncertainty about their job performance. On the one hand, economic reforms and market competition demand a high expectation of corporate performance in all sectors. Chinese senior executives who are responsible for corporate performance are therefore susceptible to performance pressure from their shareholders or bosses. On the other hand, Chinese senior executives face a range of hindrance factors in both organisational and environmental spheres, which can undermine the certainty of their job performance. Some of these factors appear to be inherent in the transitional economy of China. For example, the Chinese regulatory environment is evolving very fast in response to market changes, such as new technologies and emerging industries. As a result, Chinese senior executives find it challenging to adapt to the pace of changes in both the market and legal environment. With regard to the organisational factor, Chinese senior executives are frustrated by the incompetency of subordinates and organisational politics since the ideology of socialistic egalitarianism, *guanxi* practice in recruitment, and nepotism still prevail, impeding Chinese senior executive's task of keeping up corporate performance.

Secondly, this study has shown that Chinese senior executives suffer from common role conflicts, where they encounter incompatible expectations from the self, shareholders, superiors, subordinates, external stakeholders, and families. Yet, Chinese senior executives suffer from a special role conflict. The imperative to attend or organise party-

building activities of the CCP competes with the role of business senior executives, when fulfilling both roles is constrained by limited office time. Influenced by role conflicts, Chinese senior executives feel disorientated and frustrated about how to reconcile the different interests or expectations.

Thirdly, as indicated by this study, Chinese senior executives are exposed to a wide spectrum of workplace interpersonal issues. While workplace bullying and violence are overt and more intense, psychological contract breaches tend to be covert and less intense. Interestingly, workplace interpersonal issues in the Chinese context are not purely constituted by interpersonal conflicts, but also by the challenges to maintain interpersonal harmony. Given their managerial positions, senior executives are responsible for handling some difficult tasks (e.g. reforms and dismissal) that may disrupt interpersonal relationships. Also, the genuine desire to protect others' well-being can intensify the pressure of meeting others' needs and expectations. The stress resulting from pursuing interpersonal harmony at the workplace reflects the social goal of building a harmonious society articulated by traditional Chinese cultures as well as the Chinese government.

Lastly, this study has revealed that Chinese senior executives are not only prone to perceiving a mismatch between their competency and the requirement of their current jobs, but also aspire to pursue some challenging work goals initiated by themselves due to the desire for career success. Career success can mean different things to different senior executives. For younger senior executives, they seem to care more about objective career satisfaction, such as a significant promotion, financial incentives, and a competitive career profile for future employability. For older senior executives, they tend to emphasise subjective career success, such as pride in achievement and job satisfaction. The different emphasises in career success reflect the influence of Confucianism that prescribes different social expectations of the individual at different developmental stages in life.

In a transitional economy with drastic social changes and increasing competition, Chinese senior executives feel stressed at work because many organisational and environmental factors hinder their job performance; workplace interpersonal relationships become more tense; they face many incongruent expectations from the self, work, family, and political domain; and they are enthusiastic about pursuing career success.

8.2.2 Research question 2.

The second research question explores how resources are used to cope with work stress. This study has revealed that Chinese senior executives use personal, job, and social resources to cope. Amidst these, personal resources appear to prevail over other resources since they facilitate three major coping strategies: problem-focused, emotion-focused, and meaning-focused coping strategies, while job and social resources are mainly used to implement problem-focused coping strategies.

Individual coping refers to coping with their stress through the assistance of their personal resources rather than seeking others' help or involvement. Personal resources, including problem solving skills, social skills, and private time and money are used to implement tactical communication, direct confrontation, and increase work engagement, which aim to resolve problems (problem-focused coping). Self-control ability helps Chinese senior executives to alleviate their emotional distress through acceptance, avoidance, and suppression (emotion-focused coping). Personal beliefs and goals are utilised to neutralise the negative meaning of their stressful encounters, including positive reframing, being optimistic, responding reattribution, and compensatory self-enhancement (meaning-focused coping).

Collective coping refers to the coping effort involving some organisational inputs to manage an individual's work stress. This study has shown that colleagues' instrumental support such as advice or physical assistance help in addressing problems. Additionally, organisational procedure is utilised to involve colleagues to share the accountability of some arduous tasks. Moreover, Chinese senior executives use their managerial power to propose and enact new organisational policies to enhance their control of situations. Lastly, colleagues' emotional support such as showing empathy and sharing similar experiences is used to adjust emotions. The pattern of collective coping emerging from this study seems to be predominantly made up of problem-focused coping strategies rather than emotion-focused coping strategies.

Social coping is concerned with the effort to seek and utilise resources outside of the workplace for dealing with work stress. This study defines social resources as resources obtained from the wider society rather than from organisations. This shows that political and business guanxi are used to either influence situations or help acquire the needed

resources in an informal way. Chinese senior executives also resort to formal institutional resources, such as government consultation service and police force, to address their problems or stressors. Professional counselling and family support are employed to reduce emotional distress. Similar to collective coping, the pattern of social coping tends to be problem-focused, rather than emotion-focused.

The research findings show that although Chinese senior executives are not solitary in coping with work stress, they actively mobilise job or social resources to eliminate or reduce stressors rather than express or communicate their emotional distress with others. Based on the theory of flexible coping, the ability to use multiple coping strategies in adapting to different situations is the key to maintaining resilient (C. Cheng et al., 2014; Freire et al., 2018). The fact that an asymmetric pattern of coping strategies emerged in this study indicates a disadvantage of coping amongst Chinese senior executives, which contributes to their experience of work stress.

8.3 Contributions to knowledge

This study draws on cognitive appraisal theory to explore the experience of work stress of Chinese senior executives. It identifies work stressors that trigger the primary appraisal of stress and explores the secondary appraisal in which coping resources are utilised for coping (Dewe & Cooper, 2017; Dewe et al., 2010; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This study found that the context of Chinese economic transition significantly contributes to the formation of work stressors experienced by Chinese senior executives. In addition, how they cope differs in individual, collective, and social coping and the difference is also influenced by the Chinese context. It is evident from the findings that while in individual coping, Chinese senior executives have no restriction on employing their personal resources to cope, they refrain from expressing and communicating their emotional distress in collective and social coping. As a result, the deficit in collective and social coping can undermine their ability to utilise job and social resources to cope. Therefore, the feeling of stress remains significant according to the narrative of participants. This study contributes to cognitive appraisal theory by demonstrating the salient role of the Chinese context in shaping the overall experience of work stress from both the primary and secondary appraisal perspectives. Specific contributions to the literature are outlined below.

8.3.1 A new dimension of role conflicts

Drawing on the Chinese context, this study discovered a new dimension of role conflict termed political-business role conflict. Previous research of role conflict has mainly focused on incongruent role expectations within the business domain, while the political environment as a macro job context has been neglected. This study fills in this gap by showing that the political demand of party-building under the one-party regime is naturally embedded in the business context, where senior executives with CCP membership struggle to meet both business and political obligations due to the time constraint. As CCP Chinese senior executives are required to organise or attend party-building activities, political-business role conflict is two folds. If the Chinese senior executive is only compelled to attend party-building activities, he or she may struggle to manage their time for business tasks, such as meeting clients. The other situation is that if the Chinese senior executive is responsible for organising party-building activities, he or she may face the challenge of coordinating colleagues' time in order to transfer them from business tasks to party-building activities.

8.3.2 A new dimension of workplace interpersonal issues

This study also identifies harmony-maintenance challenges as a new dimension of workplace interpersonal issues. The existing literature of workplace interpersonal issues are analogous to interpersonal conflicts. However, this study revealed that Chinese senior executives not only face interpersonal conflicts but also the challenges to maintain interpersonal harmony. There are two main types of challenges. One challenge is superficial-harmony challenge, where Chinese senior executives worry that their decisions on some high-stakes matters will disrupt their interpersonal harmony with colleagues. The other challenge is genuine-harmony challenge, where they feel obligated but find it difficult to protect their subordinates' well-being when the business scenario is complex. Pursuing harmony is believed to be culturally determined (L.-L. Huang, 2016; C. Li, 2014). This culturally inherent goal can clash with the deepening economic reforms in China where efficiency and economic returns are highly stressed. While previous organisational research mostly examines harmony within the context of conflict resolution, this study extends the literature by showing that pursuing harmony can be a source of work stress.

8.3.3 A new dimension of career-related stressors

Research investigating career-related stressors remains limited (P. Yang, 2017b), and yet mostly focuses on negative, confining career experiences, such as job insecurity and career plateau (D.-R. Chen et al., 2008; G. H. L. Cheng & Chan, 2008; Dewe & Cooper, 2017). Although this study also identifies a negative career-related stressor - perceived competency mismatch, it further expands the literature by showing an emerging stressor that Chinese senior executives create - challenging work goals beyond their job requirements because of their desire for career success. Due to the self-imposed or self-initiated work goals, the Chinese senior executives are consequently entangled in many traditional work stressors, such as excessive workload and interpersonal conflicts. Past research tends to see work stressors as something determined by the workplace environment. However, this study has shown that individuals can take part in creating a challenging work environment by their own initiatives driven by career ambition. Thus, self-initiated work goals significantly contribute to the work stress experienced by Chinese senior executives. This work stressor may not be unique to Chinese senior executives, but the analysis of the Chinese cultural and institutional characteristics indicates that Chinese senior executives carry a lot of social pressure related to advancing their careers.

8.3.4 Extending the causes of performance uncertainty

Only a few studies have investigated performance uncertainty by examining their relationship with some organisational factors, such as role ambiguity and organisational change (DeGhetto et al., 2017; O' Driscoll & Beehr, 1994). This study has shown that the uncertainty of job performance is not only caused by organisational factors, but also environmental factors, such as a challenging regulatory environment and competitive business environment. This finding adds to the literature that work stressors are not confined to the workplace environment but also the external environment. Especially in a transitional economy like China where its market and legal environments are evolving rapidly, uncertainty has been a recurring theme due to this volatile external environment.

8.3.5 Bridging job resources and collective coping strategies

Scholars have called for more attention to the collective form of coping since most research has tended to focus on individual efforts of coping (Peiró, 2008; Rodríguez et al., 2019). This study adds to this line of scholarly interest by investigating how job

resources are utilised to facilitate collective coping. This study has identified four major relationships between job resources and collective coping strategies: 1) colleagues' instrumental support is used to resolve problems; 2) organisational procedures are used to involve colleagues to share the accountability of managerial tasks; 3) managerial power is utilised to create new organisational policies to tackle on difficult tasks; 4) colleagues' emotional support is received to counteract negative emotions. Overall, the pattern of collective coping in the Chinese senior executive context is asymmetric with more active forms of problem-focused coping being more prevalent.

8.3.6 Bridging social resources and social coping strategies

Research that investigates coping resources and coping strategies at the social level has been very limited in the work stress context. In this regard, social support has been a confounding construct unfortunately, lacking a conceptual boundary between support received within the workplace and that received from the outside. As a result, this study reconceptualises social resource, highlighting the support or resources available outside of the workplace that can be used to cope with work stress. Social coping means coping strategies assisted by social resources. This study has discovered four main relationships between social resources and social coping strategies: 1) social *guanxi* (Chinese personal ties with government officials and people in the business network) is employed to influence stressful situations; 2) social *guanxi* is employed to obtain the needed resources; 3) institutional resources are utilised to address problems through various ways, such as seeking information and advice, acquiring human resource, and legal protection; 4) family support and external counselling are used to manage emotional distress. Being consistent with collective coping, social coping in the Chinese senior executive context is highly asymmetric with a disposition of engaging in problem-focused coping strategies.

8.4 Practical implications

Organisational stress interventions are usually categorised into primary, secondary, and tertiary levels (Cary L. Cooper & Cartwright, 1997; Kelloway et al., 2008). Based on the findings of this study, the following discussion sheds light on primary, secondary, and tertiary interventions recommended to Chinese enterprises as well as suggestions to the Chinese government. It is worth mentioning that the practical implications here are not

comprehensive as they are only based on the key findings in this study. Table 8.1 summarises the practical implications in relation to the findings and the literature.

8.4.1 Primary intervention

The primary intervention targets the elimination or reduction of stressors (Cooper & Cartwright, 1997). The success of primary intervention is largely dependent on the clear rationale of the intervention actions that specifically address certain stressors (Schelvis et al., 2017). For instance, in order to address the stressor of lacking recognition from peers, managers in an Australian public sector organisation were instructed to acknowledge peers' achievements at monthly meetings and other social occasions (Dollard & Gordon, 2014). Based on the stressors identified in this study, Chinese enterprises can develop stressor-driven initiatives to tackle the issue of work stress more specifically.

Table 8.1: Recommended stress interventions based on this study and literature

Level of intervention	Actions of intervention	Supporting findings from the present study
Primary organisational intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage in actions to increase predictivity, such as strengthening in-house and external legal and business consulting services Recognise party-building activities as part of the normal corporate activities and establish reliever plans to release CCP senior executives from business duties temporarily Provide business and administration training on reconciling traditional values and modern business ethics Engage in actions to help senior executives maintain "lifetime employability" such as rolling out succession planning and encouraging them to express their personal aspirations (Dollard & Gordon, 2014) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Performance uncertainty is not only caused by organisational factors but also environmental factors The difficulty of meeting both political and business role expectations because of the constraint of time The difficulty of maintaining interpersonal harmony while engaging in managerial tasks that can jeopardise this social goal In order to satisfy the desire for career success, challenging work goals are self-initiated
Secondary organisational intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compensate the time and finance invested personally for building and maintaining social guanxi 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social guanxi is utilised to resolve workplace issues as a strategy of problem-focused coping
Tertiary organisational intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a stress friendly workplace culture by establishing policies and EAPs with positive, nondiagnostic labels (Wan Mohd Yunus et al., 2019). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reluctance to expose emotional distress to others

Governmental intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formulate and enforce work-life balance regulations (Xiao & Cooke, 2012) • Improve the quality of counselling (Portnoy, 2013; Y. Zhang et al., 2016) and subsidise this service • Increase social awareness of work stress and its impacts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of organisational initiatives to manage stress • Counselling is a less used social resource • Reluctance to expose emotional distress to others
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First of all, performance uncertainty is a great pressure for Chinese senior executives due to organisational and environmental factors. While the external environment is probably beyond the control of the enterprises, actions of increasing the effectiveness of environmental scanning can still be implemented at the organisational level. For example, organisations can strengthen in-house or external legal and business consulting services that can supply more timely information and advice to senior executives for forecasting environmental changes and making corresponding business decisions. It is particularly important in the Chinese business environment where legal and market changes are usually frequent and drastic. An inspiring disclosure from a research participant in this study is that his enterprise hired a third-party firm to monitor the media on a daily basis. The third-party firm gleans and documents all news either good or bad about the enterprise and sends it to all members in the top management team every day. By allocating organisational resources and establishing formal procedures to manage the external uncertainty, Chinese enterprises are indeed able to assist their senior executives to manage performance uncertainty.

Secondly, as Chinese senior executives face political-business role conflict, it may be necessary to redesign the job content of senior executives with CCP membership. Chinese enterprises should recognise party-building activities as part of the normal corporate activities to adapt to the current political movement. For instance, Chinese enterprises should prepare a reliever plan to help CCP senior executives to be released temporarily from their business tasks when there is a political demand.

Thirdly, another special stressor identified in this study is harmony-maintenance challenges where Chinese senior executives may find themselves in a difficult situation to maintain their positive relationships with colleagues while they are handling some high-stakes or sensitive tasks that may jeopardise their relationships. It appears to be

imperative for Chinese enterprises to provide training and educational activities on business and administration with a focus on reconciling traditional values (e.g. harmony and guanxi) and modern management.

Lastly, this study has revealed that desire for career success is a salient stressor for Chinese senior executives. In particular, an interesting finding is that Chinese senior executives self-initiate some challenging work goals to satisfy their career aspirations. Since career management has become more a personal responsibility along with the trend of the corporate world emphasising flexibility (Baruch & Hind, 1999), Chinese enterprises need to take this trend into account. Chinese enterprises should embrace a transcendent focus from lifetime employment to lifetime employability. To do that, Chinese enterprises should proactively recognise senior executives' concerns regarding career development in a changing society. Previous research has exemplified some organisational initiatives in this regard, such as rolling out formal succession planning and encouraging staff to tell their managers about their aspirations (Dollard & Gordon, 2014).

8.4.2 Secondary intervention

While secondary intervention focuses on improving employees' skills of stress management through training and educational activities (Cooper & Cartwright, 1997), this study has revealed that Chinese enterprises can help Chinese senior executives build and maintain social guanxi that is an important resource for them to cope with their work stress. Social guanxi is a powerful social resource in China for mitigating work stress through addressing some stressors. As these stressors are usually beyond the control of their organisations, Chinese enterprises can benefit from the social guanxi possessed by their senior executives. However, building and maintaining social guanxi can be costly for Chinese senior executives because it entails a substantial amount of social interactions to build interpersonal closeness and trust (D. A. Yen et al., 2011). Informal social entertainment (e.g. winning, feast, and sport) and formal social contacts (e.g. alumni and profession association) are important for building and maintaining social guanxi (P. P. Li et al., 2019; So & Walker, 2006). However, these activities usually require investment of personal time and money. If this coping strategy is not recognised by Chinese enterprises, it can cause the loss of personal resources, which is stressful in its own right (Hobfoll, 2001). Therefore, Chinese enterprises should consider ways to compensate the time and

money invested by Chinese senior executives in building and maintaining social *guanxi* in an ethical and transparent way. For example, organisations can subsidise a portion of costs spent on attending some legitimate social activities (e.g. trade associations and cultural clubs) and allow for reimbursement or leave in lieu of overtime or penal time relating to the social activities within a reasonable limit.

8.4.3 Tertiary intervention

Tertiary intervention is concerned with treatment, rehabilitation, and recovery of employees who suffer from serious consequences of work stress (Cooper & Cartwright, 1997). This study found that Chinese senior executives tend to disguise their emotional distress publicly, although they actively involve others in eliminating or reducing stressors. They tend to portray themselves as rational and tough individuals, while they avoid showing their emotions and vulnerability. Emotional suppression may correspond to the need to demonstrate competency at the workplace (Rook et al., 2016), but it seems to be a characteristic in Asian cultures (Butler et al., 2007; Huwaë & Schaafsma, 2018). Therefore, Chinese enterprises should carefully consider organisational policies and procedures that encourage Chinese senior executives to seek others' support for restoring their psychological equilibrium especially when the stressors are insurmountable.

Chinese enterprises should create a stress friendly culture where well-being policies are established and Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) are implemented to build the awareness of stress and an infrastructure of intervention. In designing these initiatives, it is critical to use more positive, nondiagnostic labels such as self-confidence programmes, instead of those negative labels, such as depression prevention programmes (Wan Mohd Yunus et al., 2019). This is because using counselling services is commonly imbued with social stigma, such as being mentally incompetent or having psychiatric problems (Hou & Naijian, 2007; Portnoy, 2013). The more positive, nondiagnostic labelling for EAPs and organisational policies will be more effective in accommodating the Chinese social context.

8.4.4 The role of government

Attempts to tackle work stress should not be confined to individual and organisational efforts (Lerner et al., 2017; Xiao & Cooke, 2012). It is particularly true for the social context of China where uncertainty and competition have contributed tremendously to

the rise of stress and depression (Hsiao, 2020). Traditional values such as diligence and self-learning can encourage the acceptance of high workload and proactive behaviours with moral endorsement (Han & Altman, 2010). Personal desire for having better materialistic achievements also generates more demands on career development, and yet there are institutional and cultural constraints on career mobility (e.g. age discrimination in labour market) which increases the concern about career development (Hsiao, 2020). In this social context, individual well-being may give way to the pursuit of career success. For example, Jackie Ma, the founder of the e-commerce giant Alibaba group openly said that the 996 office schedule is a blessing for achieving success (Josh, 2019).²⁵

Although there have been voices stressing the importance of occupational well-being articulated by some state-run media, such as Xinhua Net (2021) and People's Daily (2019), more official actions are needed to intervene in the issue of work stress. Firstly, relevant government agencies in China should play a bigger role in formulating work-life balance regulations and enforce them thoroughly to curb the rise of work stress (Xiao & Cooke, 2012). Secondly, the government should invest more resources in improving the quality of professional counselling given the lack of systematic training and regulations in the industry (Portnoy, 2013; Y. Zhang et al., 2016). Thirdly, as counselling psychology is an emerging industry in China, the government can consider subsidising the industry or providing incentives to make this health service more accessible to the public. Lastly, social awareness of work stress and its impacts should be brought up by official campaigns through various channels (e.g. TV and social media) to reduce the social stigma of seeking counselling or other social support.

In short, combating the issue of work stress requires a structural response beyond the workplace, where the government should reinvigorate relevant legal frameworks, build more social infrastructure for counselling, and cultivate a more open social attitude towards work stress and its resultant impacts on psychological well-being.

²⁵ The so-called 996 scheme means working from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week.

Limitations

This study has four major limitations: the risk of subjectivity in qualitative data analysis, the generalisability issue, the restricted participation rate, and the lack of systemic investigation of coping constraints.

Qualitative research has been criticised as “being too impressionistic and subjective” (Bryman, 2008, p. 391). The risk of subjectivity in phenomenological research comes from the failed attempt to follow Husserl’s “phenomenological epoché”, postulating that phenomenological researchers should set aside their assumptions or presupposition about the world (Clark, 1994; Overgaard, 2015). As I have worked in a SOE in China for several years before commencing my PhD research, I needed to remain alert to reduce presuppositions in the process of data analysis. Therefore, I followed the recommended six-phases of thematic analysis to ensure trustworthiness (V. Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2016). Yet, scholars believe that it is impossible to completely remain un-susceptible to past experience (Creswell, 2007; Gibbs, 2007).

Furthermore, it is impossible to generalise the findings to all Chinese senior executives. Although recruiting research participants from Guangdong province was purposeful as the province represents a typical context of the transitional economy in China, the findings emerged from this study may not be consistent in other provinces or regions. For example, due to the “one country, two systems” policy, Hong Kong’s political, regulatory and economic environments differ from those of mainland China (Fan et al., 2016). Within mainland China, there are also some regions with a distinctive cultural composition and less economic development. For instance, Tibet is a Chinese autonomous region with rich cultures of ethnic minorities and relatively more autonomy in administration (Lai, 2016). Therefore, the research findings generated from this study only mirror the social context of Guangdong province, being one of the most developed economic areas in mainland China.

Another limitation is that the use of CIT restricted the research participation rate since requiring research participants to narrate a real, specific stressful event in the workplace can sensitise them to the risk of disclosing sensitive information (although the anonymity and the confidentiality of interview content was ensured). For example, one potential research participant said that her work stress does not come from economic factors such

as salary but comes from the different views between her and her boss. When I tried to elicit more context and asked her to provide a real example of event that could demonstrate this idea, she became hesitant and reluctant to give details. I had to end the interview politely and thank for her participation. Work stress researchers who are considering using CIT therefore should evaluate the difficulty of recruiting and interviewing research participants due to their concerns around anonymity and confidentiality.

Furthermore, it came to my understanding at a later stage of data analysis when the asymmetric pattern of coping strategies emerged that Chinese senior executives seem to be reluctant to reveal their emotional distress publicly. While understanding the underlying reasons for this was not within the scope of this study, it is important for future research to investigate coping constraints on expressing or communicating emotional distress inside and outside of the workplace. Coping strategies are not only influenced by resources but also constraints (Armstrong-Stassen, 2006; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping constraints are those personal and environmental factors that prohibit the use of specific coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Armstrong-Stassen (2006, p. 6) points out that “the theoretical and research focus has primarily been on coping resources rather than constraints”. Although there are some studies about organisational constraints being defined as counterproductive aspects of the immediate work situations, organisational constraints are treated as job demands rather than coping constraints (e.g. Pindak & Spector, 2016; Spector et al., 1988). To the best of my knowledge, only two empirical studies have explicitly examined the relationship between coping strategies and coping constraints. Armstrong-Stassen (2006) found that coping constraints, including work alienation and perceived lack of future career success reduced the use of control-orientated coping during organisational downsizing. Additionally, Armstrong-Stassen and Cameron (2003) noted that burnout as a personal constraint limited the use of control-oriented coping strategies (e.g. positive thinking, direct action, and help-seeking).

8.5 Future research

Drawing on the research limitations discussed above, this section outlines directions for future research.

First, while qualitative research enables researchers to discover new themes, quantitative research can be employed to confirm qualitative findings (Bryman, 2008). This study has discovered four theoretical models of work stressors salient in the Chinese context (see Figures 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, and 7.4). Future research can employ a deductive strategy to examine these theoretical models by applying quantitative research methods, including surveys and experiments. For example, one could use an experimental design to validate the theoretical assumption of the dualistic nature of harmony-maintenance challenges (superficial-harmony challenge and genuine-harmony challenge) in predicting work stress. In this case, the researcher would randomly divide research participants into three groups. The three groups are given a simulated managerial task of drafting a proposal (e.g. performance appraisal reform) needed to be completed in a limited time. Group A would be the control group; group B would be the group for examining the effect of superficial-harmony challenge; and group C would be the group for examining the effect of genuine-harmony challenge. The same contextual information about the task would be given to all three groups and then their stress indicators (e.g. blood pressure and anxiety) would be measured. After 15 minutes, more information about the managerial task would be given. Participants in group B would be told that the managerial task seems very suspicious to colleagues and would certainly cause a deterioration of his or her interpersonal relationships with them. Participants in group C would be told that the managerial task is welcomed by most colleagues and its successful implementation would strengthen his or her interpersonal relationships with others. Participants in group A (the control group) would not be given further information. The level of stress indicators of all participants could be measured again after 30 minutes and the results of group B and C would be compared with group A to examine the effect of superficial-harmony challenge and genuine-harmony challenge in predicting stress.

In addition, as regional economic disparity is conspicuous in China (Z. Chen & Haynes, 2017), future research can benefit from investigating those less developed areas, such as Tibet and Qinghai province. These less developed areas preserve many traditional ways of living and have a lower percentage of people living in cities. For example, the rate of urbanisation (i.e. people living in towns and cities) in Tibet is only about 30% (W. J. Wang & Tian, 2020), while the average rate across China is about 60% (Xinhua Net, 2020b). Scholars predict that the average rate of urbanisation in China will reach 70% in

2030 (Sun et al., 2017). In these less urbanised areas characterised by larger populations of various ethnicities and traditional cultures, the continuous urbanisation with many social changes may bring new challenges to adapting to modernisation and marketisation. From a theoretical point of view, while studies in highly urbanised areas shed light on the impact of the “advanced” stage of economic transition on work stress, studies in less urbanised areas can provide insights into the “preliminary” transitional context.

Furthermore, due to the aforementioned limitation of CIT where research participants’ narratives are confined to specific events within the workplace, future research could adopt a more general interview protocol allowing research participants to recount their work stress more freely. This would not only ease the precaution of disclosing sensitive information about their workplaces, but would also allow them to talk about macro stressors beyond the workplace context, such as high property prices, social comparison, ageism in the labour market, and other structural problems at the social level not just at the organisational level. Although this approach to collecting data may reduce the contextual richness of descriptive details, it could provide more concentrated description of work stress experience and connections of social factors central to the causation of work stress. By doing so, future research could establish a more comprehensive framework of work stressors.

Last but not least, while this study has revealed an asymmetric pattern of coping strategies, future research can study coping constraints that deter Chinese senior executives from using emotion-focused and meaning-focused strategies in collective and social coping. Researchers can identify what coping strategies research participants did not choose to use rather than the strategies they actually used and investigate the constraints that discouraged these “unused” coping strategies. Mixed research methods can be carried out in such research. For example, researchers could administer a questionnaire about coping strategies for each research participant in determining their styles of coping. Subsequently, separate interviews would be conducted for each research participant, which would aim to know why one coping strategy is favoured over others. The reason for combining both methods would be that researchers can be better informed about the coping style of each research participant based on the questionnaire result so that they could ask specific questions subsequently about the constraints on the unused coping strategies.

8.6 Concluding remarks

Work stress is a common experience but what causes people stress and how people manage it vary across different cultures. In the past few decades, mainland China's economic development is highly visible in many aspects, from the ongoing expansion of spectacular skyscrapers to more Chinese people studying and traveling abroad. It is hard not to think that China has been undergoing a rapid transformation towards modernisation which characterises many Western societies. However, scholars in Management and Organisation have produced a growing body of knowledge acknowledging how social contexts can impact behaviours in the workplace. This study is in keeping with this broad literature from a stress perspective. Although some stressors found in this study are similar to those identified in the Western context, the Chinese senior executives I interviewed revealed new elements enriching our understanding of work stressors in a transitional economy. In a fast-changing society where uncertainty is commonplace, the pressure for job performance, fulfilling one's multiple roles, maintaining positive relationships, and building a satisfactory career significantly contribute to the work stress experienced by Chinese senior executives. The Chinese transitional economy epitomises many contradictory demands that shape the work stressors in this dynamic environment, such as maintaining harmony in constant changes, complying with rigid political duties while being responsible for business obligations, or striving to achieve stable job performance and career advancement in the uncertain environment.

In this extremely complex, dynamic workplace environment, utilising resources to cope flexibly is the key for Chinese senior executives to keep stress at bay. However, this study indicates that they tend to disguise their distress in both the organisational and social domain, making stress interventions challenging. Unfortunately, both this study and the literature suggest that there is a lack of formal initiatives provided by the workplace and the government to manage work stress. While the CCP has set up a goal in 2049 to have built China as "a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious" (Xinhua Net, 2017), more reforms and social changes will continue to come. In pursuing this national goal, workplace tension and personal desire to live a better life are expected to come along and give rise to work stress. This dynamic creates a challenge as to how Chinese working professionals maintain healthy and productive in the midst of dramatic changes. I urge for more attention from

Chinese organisations and the government to foster a positive culture of workplace well-being and provide more job and social resources for combating the escalating issue of work stress in China.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Information sheet



Understanding Work Stress and Coping Mechanisms of Senior Executives in Contemporary Chinese Enterprises

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

I am researching work stress and coping behaviour amongst senior executives in China. You are invited to take part in this research. Please read this information before deciding whether or not to take part. If you decide to participate, thank you. If you decide not to participate, thank you for considering this request.

Who am I?

My name is Zheng (Daniel) Duan and I am a Doctoral student in the PhD programme at Victoria University of Wellington. This research project is part of my PhD studies.

What is the aim of the project?

This project seeks to understand *how senior executives cope with their work stress in China*. In particular, this study focuses on how the corporate environment of state-owned, private, and mixed ownership enterprises influence senior executives' coping strategies. This research has been approved by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee 0000025842.

How can you help?

You have been invited to participate because you are a senior executive working for a wholly state-owned, wholly private, or mixed ownership enterprise in Guangdong province. If you agree to take part in this research, I would like to interview you either in person or by phone. I will explain the research and seek your consent to participate (see attached consent form) before we begin the interview.

In the interview I will ask you to think back to three stressful encounters related to your work and the ways that you typically coped with that stress. If you are interested in taking part in this research, I will send you the interview questionnaire before I seek your formal consent of participation.

The interview will take 45 minutes approximately. With your permission, I will audio record the interview and write it up later. Your participation is voluntary. You can choose not to answer any question or to stop the interview at any time, without giving a reason. You can withdraw from the study by contacting me at any time before 1/12/2018. If you withdraw, the information you provided will be destroyed or returned to you.

What will happen to the information you give?

This research is confidential. This means that the researcher named below will be aware of your identity but the research data will be combined and your identity will not be revealed in any reports, presentations, or public documentation. By participating in this research, there is a small chance you may be identifiable by people who referred you to participate in this research. The research will minimise this risk as much as possible in the way the research is reported. In the reporting of data, no organisations will be named; only generic role titles will be used; no identifiable names will be used. If data (stressful encounters) involve social connection between participants, they will be withdrawn.

Only my supervisors, the note takers (who will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement) and I will have access to the notes or transcript of the interview. The interview transcripts, summaries and any recordings will be kept securely and destroyed by 1 March 2022.

What will the project produce?

The information from my research will be used in my PhD dissertation, academic publications and conferences.

If you accept this invitation, what are your rights as a research participant?

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Please DO NOT feel obligated to participate in this research due to any possible personal connection with the researcher. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- choose not to answer any question;
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview;
- withdraw from the study before 1/12/2018;
- ask any questions about the study at any time;
- receive a copy of your interview transcript;
- receive a copy of the final report by email.

If you feel distressed during and/or after the interview, what support do you have?

As this interview asks you about your work-related stressful encounters, you may feel distressed during and/or after the interview. Feeling distressed is totally understandable and normal, and the following protocols are in place to manage your distress.

Approximately every 20 minutes during the interview, I will ask you whether you feel comfortable to continue. If you feel distressed at any stage of the interview, you can ask me

to stop and take a break, or you can decide to arrange another time for continuing the interview, or you can withdraw from the interview completely.

After the interview, if you feel distressed, you can use the 24-hour free psychological counseling service by phone or QQ provided by the Guangzhou Crisis and Intervention Center (GZCIC). The phone numbers are 020-81899120 and 020-12320-5. QQ number is 1661042151. For other psychological intervention services, please refer to GZCIC's website: <http://www.gzcrisis.com>

If you have any questions or problems, who can you contact?

If you have any questions, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact me:

Student:

Zheng (Daniel) Duan

Email: daniel.duan@vuw.ac.nz

WeChat: shuiyunlanwan

Primary Supervisor:

AProf Jane Bryson

School of Management

Phone: +64-4-463 5707

Email: jane.bryson@vuw.ac.nz

Human Ethics Committee information

If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research you may contact the Victoria University HEC Convenor: Judith Loveridge. Email judith.loveridge@vuw.ac.nz or telephone +64-4-463 6028.

Appendix B: Consent forms



Understanding Work Stress and Coping Mechanisms of Senior Executives in Contemporary Chinese Enterprises

CONSENT TO INTERVIEW (audio recorded)

This consent form will be held for 5 years.

Researcher: Zheng (Daniel) Duan, School of Management, Victoria University of Wellington.

- I have read the Information Sheet and the project has been explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can ask further questions at any time.
- I agree to take part in an audio recorded interview.

I understand that:

- I may withdraw from this study at any point before 1/12/2018, and any information that I have provided will be returned to me or destroyed.
- The identifiable information I have provided will be destroyed on 1/3/2022.
- Any information I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and the supervisors.
- I understand that the results will be used for a PhD dissertation and academic publications, and presented at conferences.
- My name will not be used in reports, nor will any information that would identify me.
- I would like a copy of the transcript of my interview: Yes ☐ No ☐
- I would like to receive a copy of the final report and have added my email address below. Yes ☐ No ☐

Signature of participant: _____
Name of participant: _____
Date: _____
Contact details: _____



Understanding Work Stress and Coping Mechanisms of Senior Executives in Contemporary Chinese Enterprises

CONSENT TO INTERVIEW (non-audio recorded)

This consent form will be held for 5 years.

Researcher: Zheng (Daniel) Duan, School of Management, Victoria University of Wellington.

- I have read the Information Sheet and the project has been explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can ask further questions at any time.
- I agree to take part in an interview that will be transcribed by a note taker.

I understand that:

- I may withdraw from this study at any point before 1/12/2018, and any information that I have provided will be returned to me or destroyed.
- The identifiable information I have provided will be destroyed on 1/3/2022.
- Any information I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher, the supervisors and the note takers.
- I understand that the results will be used for a PhD dissertation and academic publications, and presented to conferences.
- My name will not be used in reports, nor will any information that would identify me.
- I would like a copy of the transcript of my interview: Yes ☐ No ☐
- I would like to receive a copy of the final report and have added my email address below. Yes ☐ No ☐

Signature of participant: _____
Name of participant: _____
Date: _____
Contact details: _____

Appendix C: Recruitment flyer



Invitation for interviews of work stress research

My name is Zheng (Daniel) Duan, a PhD student from Victoria University of Wellington. I am researching work stress of Chinese senior executives and their coping behaviours. I am recruiting research participants who meet the following criteria for interviews. The interview will need 45 minutes approximately. Interview data will be confidential and managed strictly according to Human Ethics Committee of the university. If you are interested in participating or have any enquiries, please feel free to contact me. Thank you!

Email: daniel.duan@vuw.ac.nz

WeChat Account: shuiyunlanwan (you can scan the QR code on this flyer to contact me)

Criteria for research participants:

1. You are a senior executive (above department managers) having responsibilities for strategic planning and performance at organisation-wide level;
2. You are from a medium or large enterprise (more than 100 employees);
3. You are from an enterprise registered in Guangdong province;
4. You are working for wholly state-owned, wholly private-owned, or mixed-ownership enterprises (mixed-ownership enterprises are owned by state and non-state shareholders);
5. You have been serving the same enterprise under the current managerial role for at least one year;
6. You are a professional manager rather than an owner of the enterprise.

