EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE OF WORKPLACE *QILING* (BULLYING) IN SHENZHEN, CHINA

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ABSTRACT

Workplace bullying constitutes a significant and widespread concern that impacts the health and wellbeing of employees in numerous work environments globally. Although previous studies conducted in European countries have explored a dominant understanding of this issue, there is an increasing interest in the role of context (e.g., cultural and socioeconomic differences) in the understanding of workplace bullying. The Chinese context differs markedly from that of European countries, where the majority of the dominant research on bullying has been conducted to date. With a scarcity of bullying research specifically targeting the Chinese context, exploring how Chinese employees experience bullying will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of this issue to better manage it in the Chinese workplace as well as globally. From the perspective of language, *qiling* is the Chinese term which has been used as the equivalent term for bullying. However, the academic understanding of *qiling* (in China) may be very different from the concept of bullying developed by scholars in European countries. Therefore, the objectives of this research were to understand the nature and development of workplace *qiling* from an employee's perspective in a Chinese context (i.e., Shenzhen).

Drawing on a pragmatic philosophical position, a constructivist grounded theory approach was used to address the research objectives. This study collected qualitative data through a semi-structured interview conducted virtually. It adopted three sampling methods, purposive, snowball and theoretical sampling methods, to recruit participants. As a result, thirty-two participants, who were employees working in companies in Shenzhen and believed that they had either directly or indirectly experienced *qiling* within the last two years, were recruited for this study. Three stages of data analysis, initial, focused, and theoretical coding, were conducted to construct the findings from the collected data.

The research findings contribute to an in-depth understanding of the nature and development of *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen. In terms of the nature of *qiling*, although its features were generally similar to the dominant understanding of workplace bullying, *qiling* behaviour is relatively invisible and subtle due to the influence of Chinese culture, and intention was considered by employees in Shenzhen as a crucial feature of *qiling*. In addition, the identified sources of power causing the power imbalance between perpetrators and targets included hierarchy, *zili* (seniority), and *guanxi* (relationship). The traditional Chinese belief of *shi bu*

guo san (the rule of three times) was also identified regarding the frequency and duration of *qiling*. In terms of the development of *qiling*, the identified organisational antecedents can be grouped by involving Salin's (2003) framework as a relevant sensitising concept, (1) enabling structures and processes (i.e., perceived power imbalance, adverse leadership styles, lack of sufficient management competencies, and coercive workplace culture); (2) motivating structures and processes (i.e., conflict of interest and *neijuan* (rat race)); and (3) precipitating processes (i.e., organisational changes). Although some of the organisational antecedents evident from the data overlapped with European theoretical frameworks, unique antecedents caused or influenced by Chinese culture and the characteristics of Shenzhen were identified.

Overall, this study provides new insight into *qiling* in the Chinese context equivalent to bullying. It also provides further evidence for the importance of contextual framing of workplace bullying in China and across different countries. The findings of this study are crucial because a thorough understanding of *qiling* is the cornerstone of developing prevention and intervention strategies to reduce the issue in the Chinese workplace, and it also contributes to knowledge about the global understanding and management of workplace bullying.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Orientation

An increasing number of organisations are paying more attention to providing a healthy work environment for workers in order to improve their health and wellbeing (Nierenberg et al., 2017). However, workplace bullying is a severe and pervasive issue affecting employee health and wellbeing in many workplaces across the world (Dollard & Jain, 2019; Nauman et al., 2019; Yoo & Lee, 2018). From the perspective of many European countries – where the majority of the research has been conducted – bullying at work is generally described as a series of repeated negative behaviours that affect the targets' work and cause personal harm (Einarsen et al., 2011; Einarsen et al., 2020). Given that this issue is likely to occur in some form globally, it continues to prompt scholars in the domain to explore and understand its nature and development.

To date, bullying in the workplace has been explored for more than four decades, and the existing literature has provided an in-depth understanding of bullying at work, such as its definition, antecedents, and consequences (Einarsen et al., 2020; Einarsen et al., 2011). In terms of the definitions of workplace bullying, while there is no consistent definition, it has developed differently across European, North American, and Oceania countries (Einarsen et al., 2011; Einarsen et al., 2020; Gardner et al., 2016; Ling et al., 2016; Rosander & Blomberg, 2019). For example, the academic literature demonstrates the differences in bullying behaviours and their duration and frequency between European and Asian contexts (Salin et al., 2020). Bullying also leads to both negative individual and organisational consequences, for example, increasing personal illness (Fevre et al., 2008) and turnover intention (Coetzee & van Dyk, 2018). In addition, the literature has explored the antecedents of workplace bullying, particularly organisational factors, to explore how it develops (Salin, 2003; Strandmark & Hallberg, 2007). This study is required to obtain a clear understanding of the issue and its antecedents in the Chinese context so as to be able to develop targeted prevention and intervention initiatives to address it.

While workplace bullying behaviour is a universal phenomenon, cultural and socioeconomic factors may affect how people perceive and understand bullying (Einarsen et al., 2011). Thus, there is an increasing interest in contextual differences in workplace research due to cultural diversity and various socioeconomic factors. For instance, the literature shows that the

understanding of bullying, such as the behaviours said to constitute bullying, the criteria upon which bullying is defined (Salin et al., 2019) and the extent to which bullying is accepted or tolerated in organisational and societal contexts (Power et al., 2013), are very different in various countries. This means that cultural and socioeconomic differences play crucial roles in understanding workplace bullying in different countries. While workplace bullying has been well explored in many European countries, it has received relatively little attention in Asian contexts. Therefore, the nature and development of bullying in China may differ from what is portrayed in studies conducted in European countries.

China has over 3.3 million organisations employing 775.9 million people (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2019). As Chinese employees are becoming increasingly aware of occupational health and wellbeing, the topic of workplace bullying has become popular in recent years. According to a global bullying survey, around 40 per cent of Chinese employees experienced bullying at work (Jiang et al., 2012). Further, considering China's unique socioeconomic and cultural factors, the actual targets of bullying are likely to far exceed this percentage (Xiao & Peng, 2014). Even more worryingly, as one Chinese registered Human Resource (HR) professional described, if an employee was not bullied, then that person was not Chinese (Li, 2019). Therefore, workplace bullying in the country has become a serious issue and requires more attention to reduce its impact on Chinese employees' health and wellbeing.

Despite the prevalence and impact, workplace bullying in China has received substantially less research attention than bullying in European countries. The existing research is predominantly quantitative, and examines the harmful consequences for employees, for example, increased intention to leave (McCormack et al., 2009) and physical and emotional strains (Sims & Sun, 2012). Although examining these consequences is important, understanding the nature of workplace bullying in China and how it develops has received little attention. Yet the latter is arguably more important in contributing to the understanding and management of bullying in China as well as globally. To understand the nature and development of bullying in the Chinese context, an understanding of how Chinese employees experience bullying is crucial.

China is one of the fastest-growing economies in the world and has many variations in people, workplaces, and culture. The population of over 1.4 billion encompasses a wide array of ethnic groups, with the Han Chinese majority living alongside 55 officially recognised ethnic

minorities with their own languages, traditions, and cultural values (Zhou & Nunes 2016). This ethnic variety is mirrored in the multitude of dialects and local languages spoken across the country, which contributes to the rich cultural diversity (Hansen, 2011). In addition, there are several variations in Chinese people due to geographic differences. More specifically, the geographic divide between northern and southern China has historically influenced not only the physical characteristics and dialects of its people but also their personalities and cultural values, particularly within the workplace (Nathan & Scobell, 2015). In the workplace, an employee from northern China is often perceived as direct and straightforward in their communication style and they are known for a forthright manner. One of the main reasons is that employees from northern China tend to value efficiency and effectiveness, often preferring a hierarchical structure within business settings (Brew & Cairns, 2004). This reflects their respect for authority and tradition, influenced by Chinese traditional cultural values, for example, Confucianism (Lau et al., 2023). Further, this can also be seen in their adherence to established protocols and the significant value they place on collective success and the accomplishments of the group or company (Hui et al., 2015).

Unlike northern China, employees who come from southern China, with key cities including Shenzhen and Guangzhou, may exhibit more flexible and adaptable workplace behaviours (Lin et al., 2020), influenced by both traditional Chinese cultural values and globalisation (Herrmann-Pillath, 2023). This can be partly attributed to the region's historical and economic context, where a blend of international trade and rapid modernisation necessitates a pragmatic approach (Cheng et al., 2023). The cultural values in southern China, particularly Shenzhen, influenced by both traditional Chinese values and the city's reputation as a 'melting pot' due to its proximity to Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, also foster a more nuanced and accommodating communication style (Guo & Herrmann-Pillath, 2023). Additionally, the entrepreneurial spirit that pervades the economic landscape of cities such as Shenzhen, which is known as China's "Silicon Valley", encourages a mindset that is innovative and responsive to change (Wang, 2022). Therefore, due to the regional diversity and cultural complexity of the country, many studies in the field of organisational behaviours often focus on a specific area or city as a starting point to explore insights into the broader Chinese context (Binz et al., 2016; Chan et al., 2018). This targeted approach allows researchers to delve deeply into localised practices and nuances that might be ignored in a country-based study.

Understanding the experiences of workplace bullying in Shenzhen is essential because of its unique combination of traditional Chinese values and global influences. The city stands out as a centre of technological innovation and international commerce and brings together longstanding cultural customs with the forces of globalisation (Yang, 2015). This intersection is likely to lead to a complex workplace dynamic where traditional Chinese hierarchical structures meet modern corporate cultures that emphasise flat hierarchy and open communication (Lee et al., 2018). The resulting clash of expectations and behavioural norms can create environments where bullying might manifest in culturally nuanced ways. The potential for conflict between these different values may give rise to workplace bullying in various forms. In addition, the diverse workforce of Shenzhen, driven by both local and migrant populations, presents a typical example for examining the broader societal shifts and their implications on workplace behaviours (He & Huang, 2015). Moreover, given Shenzhen's unique cultural attributes, exploring workplace bullying within this city may well reflect the current state of contemporary Chinese companies. Shenzhen is a fusion of traditional cultural influences and globalisation (Nan, 2021), providing rich evidence for understanding workplace bullying in the wider workplace in modern China.

This study adopts a pan-industry perspective in order to capture a broad spectrum of workplace bullying experiences from employees in Shenzhen. The main reason is that it enables the identification of common themes and patterns that may exist across various sectors and industries (Robinson et al., 2016). In addition, the study initially avoids focusing on a specific demographic group, such as occupation and gender, to concentrate solely on the cultural and interpersonal dynamics unique to Shenzhen. Given that very limited work has been conducted to explore the nature of bullying, this approach is beneficial for developing an initial understanding and recommendations that can be applied broadly in preventing and intervening in bullying in the Shenzhen workplace.

The issue of language is a key consideration in this study. In Japan, workplace bullying, referred to as '*ijime*', encompasses colleague harassment and is prevalent due to the intense pressure of societal expectations on individuals, often leading to a lack of job satisfaction and, in some cases, coercion to leave the organisation (Morita et al., 1999). Similarly, in Korea, the term '*tae-wum*' or '*tae-wu-gi*', meaning 'to burn something', has been used in the media to describe damaging actions within the nursing sector, including both physical and psychological abuse, often rationalised as a means to improve efficiency (Lee et al., 2014). *Qiling* is the

Chinese term that most directly translates to the English word *bullying* and has been used by academics researching workplace bullying in China. Like the definition of workplace bullying developed in European countries, *qiling* is characterised in dictionary definitions, mainstream media, and academic literature as workplace behaviour that is harmful to those exposed to it. However, there are also indications that it differs somewhat. For example, although researchers accept it as a direct translation of the term bullying as it is conceptualised in the European literature (Guo et al., 2015), lay definitions do not always incorporate important definitional elements, such as frequency and persistency of behaviours. The focus of this research was on understanding *qiling* in the Chinese workplace (i.e., Shenzhen) while referencing the European concept and literature that are relevant to this research. Moreover, it is important to consider the implementation of language when making comparisons with European bullying literature. Therefore, the evaluation of bullying and *qiling* inevitably formed a central part of this study.

1.2 Research objectives and questions

The main aim of this study is to explore the nature and development of *qiling* in a Chinese context (i.e., in the city of Shenzhen). Specifically, the objectives are (1) to understand the nature of *qiling* and (2) to understand how *qiling* develops from a Chinese employee's perspective. Therefore, the main research question is:

- How do Chinese employees experience *qiling* at work?

The sub-research questions are:

- What is the nature of *qiling* in Shenzhen, China?
- How does *qiling* develop in Shenzhen, China?

1.3 Research design

To explore the experience of *qiling* in the Chinese context (i.e., Shenzhen), identifying the most appropriate research method based on a consideration of ontology and epistemology is essential. The researcher holds a pragmatic worldview, which is guided by a problem-oriented philosophy. This approach prioritises the selection of the most suitable research method based on the research questions, rather than relying on a specific paradigm. For example, in contrast to positivists who generally favour quantitative methods, or interpretivists who lean towards qualitative methods, a pragmatic researcher chooses methods that are most likely to yield practical results (Bell et al., 2022). Considering various qualitative and quantitative research methods, constructivist grounded theory was decided as the most appropriate research design

to address the two research questions. As detailed in Chapter 3, the purpose of constructivist theory is to identify the situated nature of a phenomenon and determine how it happens.

This study collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews conducted virtually. The participant selection criteria included employees who (1) were currently working (either full-time or part-time) in organisations in Shenzhen and (2) believed they either directly or indirectly experienced *qiling* in the workplace within the last two years. The sampling method started with purposive and snowball sampling and progressed to a theoretical sampling method. As a result, thirty-two participants were recruited for this study. Three stages of data analysis, including initial, focused, and theoretical coding, were conducted to construct the findings from the collected data. Other fundamental grounded theory methods, including theoretical memoing, were also used in the process of data collection and analysis.

1.4 Thesis structure

This thesis consists of seven chapters. Chapter 1 has provided a brief introduction to workplace bullying and then detailed the research objectives and questions as well as the methodology used in this study. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the dominant bullying literature in European countries. Following this review, Chapter 3 reviews the bullying literature, focusing on the Chinese context. Based on these two literature reviews, the central research gap – the lack of exploring experiences of workplace *qiling* in China – is identified. Chapter 4 describes the methodology chosen to address the research questions. In this chapter, first, the researcher's philosophical worldview (pragmatism) will be discussed to explain how this worldview guides this research. Given the consideration of various research methodology approaches and three main versions of grounded theory, a specific version of grounded theory (Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory) was chosen as the best method to address the research questions. Following the discussion of this decision, the framework for conducting Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory, including data collection and analysis, the ethical considerations, and methodological rigour for this research will be discussed. Chapter 5 presents the findings relating to the nature of *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen and discusses the findings with reference to the existing bullying literature. Following this, Chapter 6 presents the findings relating to the development of *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen and discusses the findings in relation to the existing bullying literature. Finally, Chapter 7 summarises the key answers to the research questions and discusses the contributions from three perspectives,

including theoretical contributions and practical implementations. In addition, the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are also included in the chapter.

CHAPTER TWO: WORKPLACE BULLYING LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Chapter overview

A preliminary literature review was conducted at the beginning of this study. The review identified the dominant bullying literature that had already been established about the nature and development of workplace bullying and those that remain unknown. The aim was to provide a broad evaluation of the existing bullying literature rather than an exhaustive review. Theoretical sensitivity refers to the conceptual insight that researchers cultivate to comprehend and interpret the significance and meaning of data (Glaser, 1978; Hoare et al., 2012). Therefore, the researcher started with developing theoretical sensitivity towards the nature and development of bullying and then identified gaps in the literature in order to prove a genuine need to conduct this study (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Giles et al., 2013; Thistoll et al., 2016).

To prevent pre-conceived ideas from influencing the theory development, researchers using the classic version of the grounded theory approach would purposefully delay the conduction of a preliminary literature review until after data collection and analysis (Glaser, 1992, 1998, 2001). However, the constructivist grounded theorists "bring doubt and a critical eye to our appraisals of earlier theories and research literature" (Charmaz, 2021, p.156) and endorse the stance of theoretical agnosticism proposed by Henwood and Pidgeon (2003). Additionally, the researcher aligned with Thornberg's (2012) concept of 'informed grounded theory', which recognizes that a preliminary literature review enriches research planning, provided continuous reflexivity guards against imposing preconceived notions (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). Similarly, Giles et al. (2013) employ the analogy of an 'open mind versus an empty head' to illustrate how researchers can remain receptive to new ideas while also possessing some familiarity with the topic before embarking on data collection. Therefore, in this study, a preliminary review of the literature was conducted, which was also required for the PhD confirmation report.

Given the adopted methodology using the constructivist grounded theory approach, the literature review was completed in two stages: (1) a preliminary literature review was conducted to understand the research background and identify the research gaps, and then (2) the review was updated during the data interpretation and the development of the result and discussion chapters (Baid, 2019; Charmaz, 2021). The main purposes of this update aimed to

include relevant concepts and theories guided by the research findings that emerged from the data. In addition, informed by the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014; Son & Berdychevsky, 2022), the theoretical understanding of workplace bullying was used as a sensitising concept in the data analysis process.

The research on workplace bullying in China is scant; however, the topic was well studied by extensive research conducted in Western countries and provided a dominant understanding of workplace bullying. The following sections in this chapter review this extant literature. This chapter is built around three key areas of the bullying literature, including the nature (section 2.2), prevalence (section 2.3), consequences (section 2.4), and antecedents (section 2.5). Following this review, section 2.6 discusses how workplace bullying is understood differently in the Chinese context compared to the dominant understanding of bullying. Section 2.7 reviews bullying literature conducted in Asian countries where there are cultural similarities with China.

2.2 The nature of workplace bullying

While workplace bullying has been broadly examined in the research for over four decades, there is no consistent agreement among researchers in conceptualising this concept (Purpora et al., 2019; Rai & Agarwal, 2016). Previous studies developed various definitions of bullying and similar concepts that were used interchangeably in bullying literature to describe the phenomenon (see Appendix A for example). These concepts were also associated with slightly varying definitions provided by different researchers. However, in terms of the nature of workplace bullying, four characteristics have been explored in dominant bullying literature, including (1) negative behaviours, (2) frequency and duration, (3) intentionality, and (4) power imbalance (Chirilă & Constantin, 2013; Einarsen et al., 2020). These characteristics are crucial, as they play critical roles in forming a comprehensive definition of workplace bullying.

2.2.1 Negative behaviours

The nature of harmful and unwanted behaviour is a crucial aspect of workplace bullying. The victims are often subjected to various forms of abusive behaviours, for example, persistent insults, offensive remarks, personal criticism, and even physical violence (Einarsen, 2000). In some cases, they would also face social exclusion and isolation, such as being given the ‘silent treatment’ or being ignored entirely (Einarsen et al., 2020). Previous bullying literature distinguished two main types of negative bullying behaviours, such as (1) work-related and

person-related bullying and (2) psychological and physical bullying (Einarsen et al., 2009; Einarsen et al., 2020; Leymann, 1996).

Bullying behaviours can be categorised into work-related and person-related. Work-related bullying pertains to negative actions that impact the victim's work responsibilities, such as imposing unreasonable deadlines or overwhelming workloads, excessively monitoring tasks, and assigning trivial or meaningless duties (Einarsen et al., 2011). However, it was difficult to determine whether a person is bullied only based on these work-related behaviours without the consideration of other characteristics of bullying (Einarsen et al., 2020). For example, employees may report experiencing an unmanageable workload or excessive monitoring; however, they do not consider themselves as victims of bullying in the workplace. Nonetheless, the most commonly reported negative act among targets of workplace bullying was being denied access to information necessary to perform their work (Einarsen et al., 2020). While this was also reported by many other workers, it was a distinguishing feature when it occurs frequently among targets. In comparison, person-related bullying, encompassed behaviours such as making insulting personal remarks, teasing excessively, spreading gossip or rumours, persistent criticism, playing practical jokes, and intimidation (Einarsen et al., 2011). These person-related bullying behaviours were relatively independent of the workplace context.

Bullying behaviours can also be classified into psychological and physical. According to Buss (1961), the differentiation between psychological and physical aggression was relevant to understanding the nature of workplace bullying, where aggressive acts are predominantly psychological (Einarsen et al., 2020). Although early studies included physical abuse or threats in their classification of bullying (Einarsen, 1999; Leymann, 1996), recent bullying literature stated that bullying behaviours in the workplace are mainly psychological in nature (Einarsen et al., 2020). Studies conducted in different countries and industries suggest that the incidence of physical abuse or threats in workplace bullying is much lower than psychological behaviours (Al Muharraq et al., 2022; Gupta et al., 2017; Zapf, 1999). However, there may be variations in the prevalence of physical aggression in workplace bullying depending on the industry, work sector, and national culture (Einarsen et al., 2020).

Although there is no definitive list of bullying behaviours (Ciby & Raya, 2015), previous studies identified various specific behaviours and accordingly developed measurement scales for workplace bullying (see Appendix B) (Escartín et al., 2021). One particular bullying

behaviour list, the Revised Negative Acts Questionnaire, developed and examined in the United Kingdom has been widely utilised in the majority of countries, including European, North American, and Oceania countries (Einarsen et al., 2009; Einarsen et al., 2020; Gardner et al., 2016; Ling et al., 2016; Rosander & Blomberg, 2019). The behaviours in the Revised Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ-R) were divided into three main categories: work-related, person-related, and physically intimidating bullying (Einarsen et al., 2009). First, work-related bullying referred to negative behaviours that were targeting an employee's work or job performance (Einarsen et al., 2009). Examples of work-related bullying included giving an employee an unreasonable workload, sabotaging their work, excluding them from important meetings or information, and constantly criticising their work. Second, person-related bullying referred to negative behaviours that were directed towards an employee's personal characteristics or traits (Einarsen et al., 2009). Examples of person-related bullying included spreading rumours or gossip about an employee, insulting or belittling the person, or using offensive language towards the person. These two categories have been broadly recognised in the bullying literature (Ciby & Raya, 2015; Einarsen et al., 2011). Third, physically intimidating bullying referred to behaviours that involve physical aggression or intimidation towards an employee (Einarsen et al., 2009). Examples of physically intimidating bullying included throwing objects, invading employee's personal space, or making threatening gestures. The bullying behaviours listed in the NAQ-R are summarised in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1

Bullying Behaviours Listed in the NAQ-R

Work-related bullying	1. Someone withholding information which affects your performance 2. Being ordered to do work below your level of competence 3. Have your opinions ignored 4. Being given tasks with unreasonable deadlines 5. Excessive monitoring of your work 6. Pressure not to claim something to which by right you are entitled 7. Being exposed to an unmanageable workload

Person-related bullying	8. Being humiliated or ridiculed in connection with your work 9. Having key areas of responsibility removed or replaced with more trivial or unpleasant tasks 10. Spreading of gossip and rumours about you 11. Being ignored or excluded 12. Having insulting of offensive remarks made about your person, attitudes or your private life 13. Hints of signals from others that you should quit your job 14. Repeated reminders of your errors or mistakes 15. Being ignored or facing a hostile reaction when you approach 16. Persistent criticism of your errors or mistakes 17. Practical jokes carried out by people you don't get along with 18. Having allegations made against you 19. Being the subject of excessive teasing and sarcasm 20. Being shouted at or being the target of spontaneous anger
Physically intimidating bullying	21. Intimidating behaviours such as finger-pointing, invasion of personal space, shoving, block your way 22. Threats of violence or physical abuse or actual abuse

Note. Adapted from Einarsen et al. (2011)

2.2.2 Frequency and duration

Frequency and duration are two key characteristics that have been explored in the nature of workplace bullying in European countries. More precisely, bullying was delineated as recurrent and sustained aggressive behaviours characterised by hostility and/or perceived hostility by the recipient (Einarsen et al., 2020; Leymann, 1996). This implies that bullying is typically not regarded as a single, isolated event. Instead, it encompasses behaviours that are consistently and persistently directed towards one or more individuals. Leymann (1990) proposed that such occurrences should happen at least once a week to qualify as bullying. However, this criterion is challenging to apply because not all bullying behaviours are strictly episodic in nature (Einarsen et al., 2011). For instance, a damaging rumour may circulate, threatening to harm the victim's career or reputation, without needing to be repeated weekly week (Einarsen et al., 2011). Therefore, the primary criterion is that the behaviours or their consequences are regularly recurring rather than occurring occasionally.

In addition, a number of dominant bullying studies stated that bullying experiences were likely to last for a long duration. Leymann (1996) proposed that workplace bullying was characterised by a duration of more than six months. Similarly, Einarsen et al. (2011) suggested that repeated exposure to negative behaviour within a six-month period was a time frame for workplace bullying. However, Einarsen et al. (2020) stated that victims could also feel bullied in a shorter time frame. Many studies did not empirically specify a time frame for workplace bullying (Zapf et al., 2020). For example, a six-month criterion may not be appropriate for victims of bullying in organisations, as it was impossible to determine whether a single negative action constitutes bullying (Einarsen et al., 2020). Hence, this indicates the importance of understanding the frequency and duration of bullying, which should be further studied.

2.2.3 Intentionality

There is no consistent agreement on the characteristic of intentionality in the nature of workplace bullying developed in European countries. Researchers who supported aggression theory consider the intent to cause harm as a crucial aspect of bullying (Björkqvist et al., 1994; Einarsen et al., 2020). Aggression research stated that aggression was a deliberate act intended to harm another individual, distinguishing between accidental and unintentional harm (Allen & Anderson, 2017). This view was also supported by bullying studies (Einarsen et al., 2020). For example, Saunders et al. (2007) stated that intent is one of the critical features in the nature of workplace bullying. Including intent in the nature of bullying would distinguish it from other negative behaviours like workplace incivility or misunderstanding (Einarsen et al., 2020). Despite this, intent was not considered a fundamental element in many European studies on workplace bullying. One of the main reasons was that measuring actual or perceived intent in empirical studies is relatively rare, and the presence of intent in bullying cases was difficult to verify (Einarsen et al., 2020). The alleged perpetrator was the only one who could confirm the presence of intent, giving them the power to veto whether something constitutes bullying. This would also be the reason why most definitions of sexual harassment exclude the feature of intentionality (Einarsen et al., 2020).

The inclusion of intent as a character in the nature of workplace bullying requires clarification because there are various possible interpretations. Einarsen et al. (2020) provided an interpretation for four types of intentionality regarding workplace bullying. First, intent can refer to the intention behind each individual act of bullying. In other words, every single

behaviour occurring in bullying may be considered as intended or not intended. Second, it may pertain to the process of bullying, wherein the goal is to subject an individual to recurring and structured acts over an extended period, indicating a deliberate strategy to continue the behaviour. Third, intent can indicate the deliberate and planned effort to victimise the target, resulting in a vulnerable and disadvantaged position. Fourth, intent may pertain to the degree of explicit and conscious planning involved in causing harm to the victim. It was worth noting that the intention behind bullying can change over time as the situation progresses. Bullying behaviour may also be a by-product of micro-political behaviour, where the intention is to protect and increase a person's power in the organisation, and bullying is seen as collateral damage rather than intended behaviour (Zapf et al., 2020). Although intentionality has not been used as a definitional criterion for bullying in European countries, the perception of intent can influence an individual's decision to label their experience as bullying (Einarsen et al., 2020). Therefore, the assumption that repeated negative behaviour is intentional can be considered as a reasonable explanation from the target's perspective.

2.2.4 Power imbalance

The characteristic of the power imbalance between the parties has been accepted in the mainstream understanding of workplace bullying. The concept of power was central to the definition of workplace bullying (Gloor, 2014; Nielsen et al., 2011), which identified a power imbalance between the bullying perpetrator and the target (Branch et al., 2013). In the same vein, it is not possible to understand bullying without considering the concept of power (Hutchinson, 2010); however, power has received little systematic attention in the literature on bullying (Hutchinson & Jackson, 2015; Mishra et al., 2021). Hoel and Salin (2003) examined power dynamics as organisational precursors to bullying, contending that bullying relationships should be contextualised within the social framework of the workplace. Bullying can stem from legitimate or formal sources of organisational power, as well as arise from perceptions of powerlessness stemming from informal sources of organisational power that are social, physical, or psychological in nature.

Previous literature identified six main sources of power (shown in Table 2.2) to further explain the concept of power and how it may be used by a perpetrator of bullying to influence targets (French et al., 1959; Mishra et al., 2021; Raven, 1993). As previously stated, bullying frequently takes place when there is an uneven distribution of power, with the aggressor holding the position of power while the victim is perceived as lacking power (Einarsen et al.,

2020). Additionally, the victim's sense of helplessness is exacerbated by the repetitive negative actions carried out by the aggressors (Saunders et al., 2007). Despite the prevailing focus on power disparity in the context of bullying, scholars have posited that power is a multifaceted construct. Therefore, targets are more likely to feel powerless when facing bullying behaviour by a perpetrator who has a higher power (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2018).

Table 2.2

Sources of Power Relating to Workplace Bullying

Power	Description
Reward power	The ability of a perpetrator to influence the reward of the target
Coercive power	The understanding by the target that a perpetrator may take punitive actions against them if they fail to conform to the demands of the perpetrator
Legitimate power	Based in the value system of the target, a perpetrator has the right to influence the target and they are obligated to fulfil duties towards the perpetrator
Referent power	To establish identification with a perpetrator, the target would show conformity to their opinions and behaviour
Expert power	The extent to which the target believes that the knowledge and skills of a perpetrator are essential or influential in a given area
Information power	The information held by a perpetrator that can influence the target

Note. Adapted from Mishra et al. (2021)

2.2.5 A dominant definition of workplace bullying

Based on the above characteristics of workplace bullying, a relatively comprehensive definition provided by Einarsen et al., (2011) has been broadly recognised in many countries in Western countries. Workplace bullying refers to:

> "harassing, offending, or socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction, or process, the bullying behaviour has to occur repeatedly and regularly

(e.g., weekly) and over a period of time (e.g., about six months). Bullying is an escalating process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts. A conflict cannot be called bullying if the incident is an isolated event or if two parties of approximately equal strength are in conflict" (Einarsen et al., 2011, p. 22).

2.2.6 Theoretical underpinnings for the nature of *qiling*

Given the purpose of this research and the methodology of constructivist grounded theory, the above characteristics of workplace bullying developed in Western countries were utilised as sensitising concepts, which give the researcher a sense of direction without dictating what is to be found, to enhance the theoretical sensitivity of the researcher to explore the nature of workplace *qiling* in a Chinese context (Charmaz, 2014). In order words, these characteristics were considered as a theoretical underpinning of this study to explore the nature of *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen. The main reason is that these characteristics have been widely recognised in many countries, including European, North American, and Oceania countries (Einarsen et al., 2011; Einarsen et al., 2020; Gardner et al., 2016; Ling et al., 2016; Rosander & Blomberg, 2019). More importantly, these characteristics form a comprehensive understanding of the nature of workplace bullying.

In addition, the NAQ-R was also used as a theoretical underpinning to explore *qiling* behaviours. Although there are certain bullying behaviour lists included in various measurement scales, the NAQ-R can be considered the most typical list of bullying behaviours in Western countries as well as in many Eastern countries (Einarsen et al., 2020). However, the main limitation of using the NAQ-R as the underpinning of this study is that it might not be culturally sensitive to all environments (Kwan et al., 2020), such as the Chinese context. Certain bullying behaviours identified in the European context may not be perceived similarly in other contexts due to different social and cultural norms and workplace practices (Einarsen et al., 2020). Therefore, the NAQ-R may require cultural adaptation to ensure its relevance across different cultural contexts. These concepts encourage researchers to be more attuned to certain elements during the data analysis process.

2.3 The prevalence of workplace bullying

In order to measure the prevalence of workplace bullying, self-labelling methods (SLM) and measurement scales are widely adopted. The prevalence of workplace bullying depends on many factors, for example, the measurement scales used, the definition used, the timeframe, and the geographic fields (Hogh et al., 2017). Scholars in the field have developed a range of validated measurement scales (see Appendix B in detail) to identify targets. It can be seen that, first, these measurement scales are mainly developed in Western countries, and most of them can be used in the general workplace. Second, these measurement scales adopt various time frames (most of them from 6 to 12 months) to measure bullying behaviours. This is in line with the definitional element frequency and duration (as discussed in section 2.2.2). Third, the item number of these scales is considerably divergent, and different scales classify bullying behaviours into various dimensions or factors. For example, compared to other scales that have one or multiple dimensions of bullying, the NAQ-R, which is one of the most popular scales developed from the NAQ to measure workplace bullying, has listed three types of bullying: work-related, person-related, and physically intimidating (Einarsen et al., 2011). This can mean that different countries may consider workplace bullying differently, and thus, their measurement scales are different.

The prevalence of workplace bullying is a multifaceted issue, and the prevalence rates may be considerably different across various regions. European countries, where scholars have developed a relatively more comprehensive understanding of bullying and robust measurement scales, offer a range of bullying prevalence rates from 0.6% to 13.0% based on various measurement criteria (e.g., NAQ-R) (León-Pérez et al., 2021). In contrast, Mediterranean countries, such as Spain, Italy, and France, report relatively higher prevalence rates of workplace bullying, ranging from 2.5% to 27.9% (Chatziioannidis et al., 2018). This may be attributed to cultural practices that tolerate higher power distances and a lower humane orientation, as posited by the GLOBE study (León-Pérez et al., 2021). These cultural dimensions may inadvertently facilitate the acceptance of social inequalities and power imbalances that often contribute to bullying at work. In the United States, Keashly (2018) outlines varying rates of workplace bullying based on the method of estimation utilised: 7% to 13% of individuals identified themselves as victims of bullying, while a larger proportion, ranging from 38% to 71%, reported experiencing bullying incidents or behaviours in their workplace. Therefore, this can mean that assessing the prevalence rates is complex, and the definition and frequency of negative behaviour can influence the perceived prevalence rate.

This also highlights the importance of cultural contexts in identifying and measuring workplace bullying.

2.4 The consequences of workplace bullying

Existing literature has stated that bullying at work can lead to severe consequences at both individual and organisational levels. The following sections will discuss both individual- and organisational-level consequences of workplace bullying.

2.4.1 Individual-level consequences

Workplace bullying can lead to harm to individuals, particularly employees. Evidence indicates that targets of bullying are more likely to experience stress (Djurkovic et al., 2006; Vveinhardt et al., 2020), depression (Conway et al., 2021; Harvey et al., 2007), and anxiety (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Mikkelsen et al., 2020). Additionally, bullying may form a threat to personal identity (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008), changes in daily cortisol levels (Grynderup et al., 2017), and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Wang et al., 2022). Furthermore, bullying can contribute to burnout and poor quality of life outside work (Kim et al., 2019), especially for employees who are disabled or have a long-term illness (Fevre et al., 2013; Fevre et al., 2008). Similarly, O'Farrell et al. (2021) stated that bullying was more likely to create a sense of helplessness to employees. Even more worryingly, the harm associated with bullying may have a long-term negative influence on employees. For example, evidence showed that employees who experienced workplace bullying were more likely to have poor health conditions for a long period of time (Cooper et al., 2004; Eriksen et al., 2016). As a result, at the employee level, workplace bullying can lead to harmful and long-term consequences.

2.4.2 Organisational-level consequences

Bullying can also lead to harm to organisations. Previous literature stated that bullying can contribute to poor work performance from several perspectives, for example, taking more days off (Boudrias et al., 2021; Parent-Thirion, 2007), increasing turnover intention (Al Muharraq et al., 2022; Burnes & Pope, 2007), and reducing motivation (Agervold & Mikkelsen, 2004; Ng et al., 2022). In addition, organisations were more likely to pay a huge price for workplace bullying (Einarsen et al., 2011). For instance, an Australian survey indicated that the financial costs of workplace bullying, including legal penalties, taking days off, turnover, and reduced productivity, can cost the economy 36 billion Australian dollars each year (Australian Human

Rights Commission, 2018). Therefore, at the organisational level, the issue of bullying can lead to poor work performance and high financial costs.

2.5 The antecedents of workplace bullying

A range of factors can lead to bullying at work, and they are generally divided into individual and organisational factors (Einarsen et al., 2020; Samnani & Singh, 2012). In terms of individual levels, particularly from a target's perspective, the literature indicated that employees' personality was a key factor associated with being bullied (Einarsen et al., 2020). For example, the characteristics of targets included high levels of introversion and emotional instability (Nielsen et al., 2017) and low levels of self-esteem and responsibility (Samsudin et al., 2020). In other words, employees with these characteristics were more likely to be bullied as they were seen as being vulnerable by perpetrators (Zapf et al., 2011). From a perpetrator's perspective, many factors, such as personalities and imbalance of power, can motivate employees or managers to be perpetrators (Samnani & Singh, 2012). For example, existing studies found that perpetrators seemed to demonstrate high levels of stress (Hauge et al., 2009) and low levels of job autonomy and self-evaluation (van den Brande et al., 2016). While these individual factors are important to understanding the antecedents of workplace bullying, organisational factors are essential to explain the proliferation of bullying (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). In this section, four key organisational factors identified in the literature, (1) leadership and management styles, (2) organisational culture and policies, (3) organisational change, and (4) design of work, will be discussed as systemic antecedents of bullying. In addition, theories explaining how bullying develops will also be introduced.

2.5.1 Leadership and management styles

Leadership and management styles are considered as an organisational antecedent to workplace bullying. Workplace bullying was often associated with an abuse of power in the organisation (Björklund et al., 2019; Einarsen et al., 1994). Research on workplace bullying from the perspective of targets, indicated that their perception of leadership becomes particularly negative and less confident due to being bullied by their managers (Aquino & Thau, 2009). Although some studies have not paid more attention to the abuse of power by leaders, the literature explained that leadership could be too passive and then encourage bullying behaviour within the organisation (Einarsen et al., 2011; Skogstad et al., 2007). To illustrate this, evidence indicated that managers tended to abdicate much of their leadership responsibility in situations characterised by high levels of conflict (Hoel & Salin, 2003). In addition, leadership that was

described as weak and unclear led to unresolved conflict, which in turn led to bullying (Strandmark & Hallberg, 2007). To be specific, weak leadership was less likely to prevent and intervene in bullying in the workplace. This can lead to an aggressor seeing a lower risk of being caught and punished for bullying and motivates the perpetrators to engage in bullying behaviours (Salin, 2003). Therefore, leadership styles and the strategies they use to address conflicts are key antecedents of workplace bullying (Bulutlar & Öz, 2009; Salin, 2003).

Three common leadership styles, authoritarian, tyrannical, and laissez-faire leadership, are considered as the direct or indirect antecedents of bullying in the workplace (Nielsen et al., 2005). Firstly, an authoritarian leadership style was regarded as a direct antecedent of bullying by targets (Feijó et al., 2019). Authoritarian leadership style referred to a type of leadership where the leader exercised strict control over their subordinates, often relying on coercion and fear to maintain their authority (Pizzolitto et al., 2022). In this style of leadership, the leader made all the decisions, and subordinates were expected to obey without question. There was little room for creativity or individual initiative, and the focus was on achieving goals through strict adherence to rules and procedures (Erez & Nouri, 2010). The leader would use punishment as a means of enforcing compliance, and there was often a hierarchical structure with a clear chain of command (Pizzolitto et al., 2022). This leadership style was generally characterized by a lack of trust in subordinates and a strong emphasis on the leader's power and authority.

Second, the tyrannical leadership style is considered as a direct antecedent of bullying. This leadership style referred to a type of leader who belittled, humiliated, and manipulated employees to "get the job done", and generally obtained results at the expense of employees (Einarsen et al., 2016). This type of leadership would contribute to bullying at work (Agervold & Mikkelsen, 2004; Foster et al., 2004). For instance, a tyrannical manager was more likely to demonstrate anger when facing problems and then blame subordinates in order to push them to work harder (Skogstad et al., 2014).

Third, while laissez-faire leadership cannot be considered as a direct antecedent of workplace bullying, it can encourage the development of bullying (Samnani & Singh, 2012). As Skogstad et al. (2014) defined, laissez-faire leadership referred to a type of avoidant and non-responsive leadership in situations of needing active leader involvement. This type of leadership motivated task uncertainty and role ambiguity (Ågotnes et al., 2018). For example, given that laissez-faire

managers always turned a blind eye to employees' conflicts without any interventions, the conflict would escalate into bullying and more openly aggressive as perpetrators believed that their behaviour would not be punished (Ågotnes et al., 2018). Therefore, the above leadership styles can contribute to bullying in the workplace.

2.5.2 Organisational culture and policies

Organisational culture is an antecedent of workplace bullying. It was because bullying can be fostered by work groups or organisations that normalise abusive or even competitive behaviour (Coyne et al., 2003; Hutchinson & Jackson, 2015). Organisations characterised by a strong power imbalance created conditions conducive to workplace bullying and led to the institutionalisation of such behaviours (Salin, 2003). Particularly, some organisations seemed to tolerate workplace bullying in some ways, as if it were the way things are done (Salin, 2003).

Workplace bullying is considered by several organisations to be an 'effective' way of improving performance. Thus, the pursuit of excellence without regard to cost may contribute to the acceptance of workplace bullying in an organisation (Salin, 2003). Certain organisational cultures may even encourage harshness in their employees, which can produce bullying behaviour as a sign of this harshness (Tehrani, 2013). Furthermore, a number of researchers have asserted that workplace bullying can evolve into an accepted and sometimes even encouraged aspect of such organisational cultures (Cowie et al., 2002; Harvey et al., 2009; Plester et al., 2022). Therefore, workplace bullying may actually be perceived positively by management in some organisations. In addition, according to social learning theory, imitating bullying in the workplace can contribute to perpetuating bullying (Salin, 2003). This has significant implications for witnesses of workplace bullying behaviour, particularly if they observe the behaviour being reinforced or leading to benefits in the workplace (Paull et al., 2020; Salin, 2003). Therefore, bullying may be motivated in some organisations that ignore the issue of bullying.

The lack of organisational policies for preventing and intervening in bullying can be considered as an organisational antecedent of bullying. Organisational policies related to workplace bullying provide clear statements about what behaviours are acceptable or unacceptable in an organisation (Woodrow & Guest, 2014). The absence of a well-defined policy on matters such as workplace bullying presents considerable obstacles for employees who are inclined to confront perpetrators (Van Der Wal et al., 2021). As Salin (2003) claims, organisations can

prevent some degree of power imbalance in the organisation, particularly in relation to discrimination against groups facing bullying or other negative behaviours in the workplace, for example, women and minorities, through their structure and policies. Further, Salin (2003) believes that the absence of anti-bullying policies, which imply less monitoring and no punishment of perpetrators, are likely to lead employees to view this behaviour as accepted by the organisation. In comparison, Bulutlar and Öz (2009) found that a work climate based on rules and policies, as a more explicit component of organisational culture (Pheko et al., 2017), can reduce bullying at work. Therefore, although clear organisational policies can prevent bullying to some extent, workplace bullying is significantly less likely to occur when these policies are embedded in the working climate of the organisation.

2.5.3 Organisational change

Organisational change, such as in department restructuring and reward structure, is identified as an antecedent of workplace bullying. Existing literature stated that restructuring and reward structures can motivate bullying (Salin, 2003; Skogstad et al., 2007). To be specific, organisational changes or restructuring can lead to job insecurity, and accordingly motivate bullying at work (Fransen et al., 2014). In addition, reward structures that provided incentives for employees to compete with each other can promote bullying through behaviours designed to reduce competition between colleagues. In the same vein, as Rizer (2011) claimed, HR systems characterised by internal labour markets were less predictive of workplace bullying than external labour markets. This is because internal labour markets were more likely to provide long-term employment and internal promotion (Rizer, 2011); therefore, employees may have a higher level of job security.

2.5.4 Design of work

The design of work has been examined as an organisational antecedent of bullying at work. Three specific aspects related to the work design have been frequently discussed in existing literature (Salin & Hoel, 2011). The first factor is the lack of control of work tasks, which is often related to high workloads as well as bullying (Branch et al., 2007, 2013). The reason is that employees may feel powerless and hopeless in a work environment that has excessive supervision or lacks micro-management control (Carlock, 2013; O'Moore & Lynch, 2007). Secondly, the factor of role ambiguity can result in inadequate communication and bullying in the workplace (Agervold & Mikkelsen, 2004). Further, this factor can also lead to incompatible

expectations and needs; therefore, employees may feel more stressed and depressed, thereby leading to increased perpetration (Strandmark & Hallberg, 2007). Thirdly, given the need to improve competitiveness, a high degree of cooperation is needed between the working groups (Einarsen et al., 2020). The need for high cooperation is likely to cause or motivate conflicts and friction, and then lead to low job satisfaction as well as bullying (Hauge et al., 2007). As such, these work environment factors are essential to lead to bullying at work.

2.5.5 Theories for the development of workplace bullying

The theoretical models explaining how workplace bullying develops can start with the theory of Work Environment Hypothesis proposed by Leymann (1990). Leymann (1990) was the first scholar to challenge the idea that individual factors, including victim personality, are the main antecedents of workplace bullying. The Work Environment Hypothesis theory states that organisational factors, including leadership, work design, and the morale of management and workers, play a significant role in eliciting bullying behaviours (Einarsen et al., 2020; Leymann, 1990). Specifically, Leymann (1990) identified four main factors that contribute to bullying at work: (1) deficiencies in work design, (2) deficiencies in leadership behaviour, (3) the victim's socially exposed position, and (4) low departmental morale. While this acknowledges that poor conflict management can also contribute to bullying, Leymann (1990) emphasised that this was primarily an organisational issue rather than an individual issue. When managers or supervisors neglect or deny conflicts, or when they themselves are involved in group dynamics, they can exacerbate bullying at work (Leymann, 1996). As bullying occurs within a context governed by formal behavioural rules and responsibilities, it is the responsibility of the organisation and its management to address and prevent it.

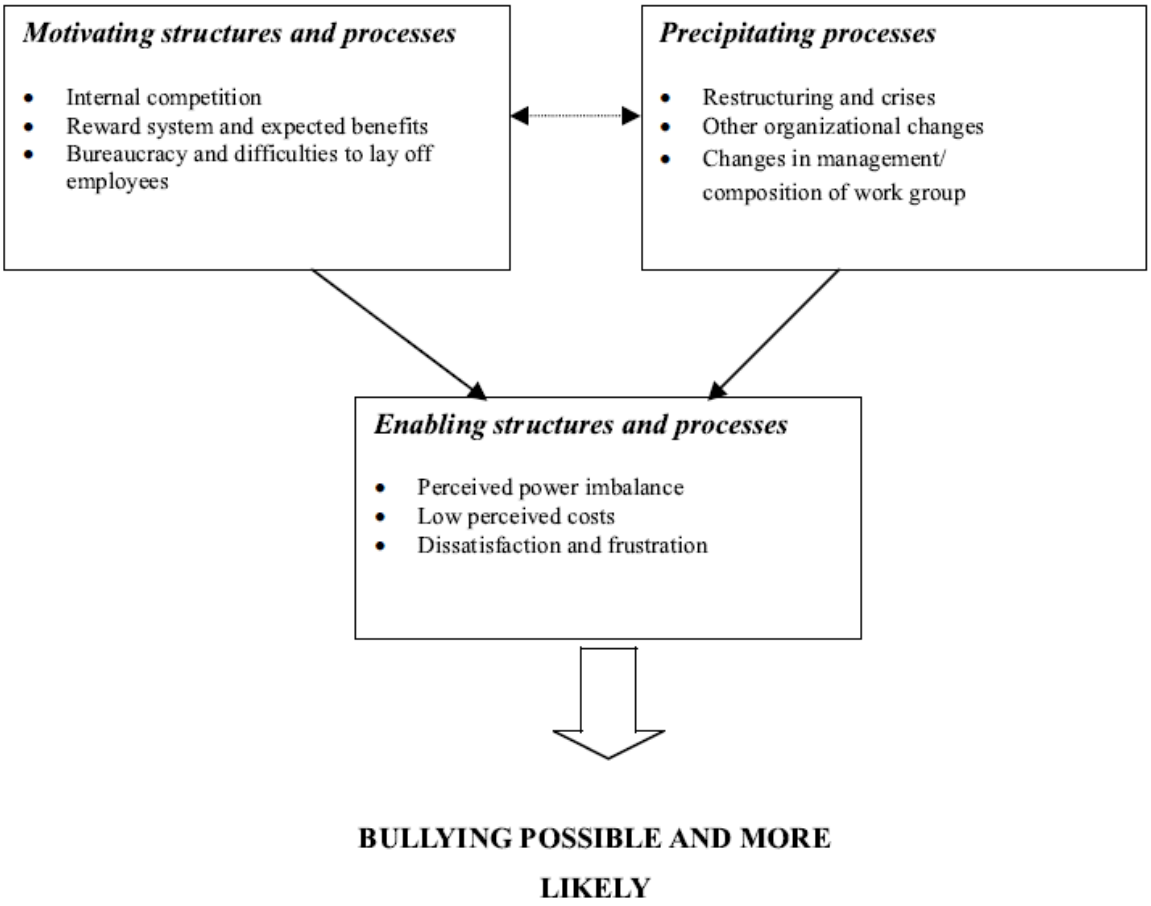
An increasing number of studies support the Work Environment Hypothesis theory and further develop models and frameworks in order to explain how bullying develops in the workplace. Of this, Baillien et al. (2009) developed a theoretical model explaining workplace bullying may develop from organisational factors in three different ways. First, bullying may come from ineffective frustration management (Baillien et al., 2009). A lack of job resources, such as job control and social support, may impede an individual's ability to cope. In addition, job pressures such as time pressure can deplete personal resources (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000), rendering them ineffective for conflict management. In other words, the presence of stresses and a deficiency of resources hinders the management of conflicts constructively. As a result, this can contribute to the escalation of conflicts and, ultimately, to bullying (Einarsen et al.,

2020). Second, bullying may result from escalating confrontations (Baillien et al., 2009). A high base rate of disagreements may enhance the probability that a conflict escalates into bullying. Several job factors, such as role conflicts and organisational restrictions, enhance the likelihood of conflicts and, consequently, the probability of conflict escalation (Einarsen et al., 2020). In addition, the coping approaches to conflicts may be active for abusers and passive for victims. Thirdly, harmful team and organisational cultures or habits may contribute to bullying (Baillien et al., 2009). Such cultures may indicate that bullying is tolerated within the organisation or team because it is not punished (Einarsen et al., 2020).

In addition to the three-way model proposed by Baillien et al. (2009), Salin (2003) proposes a theoretical framework to discuss how structures and processes in the work environment contribute to workplace bullying. Based on this theoretical framework (see Figure 2.1), the antecedents of bullying in the literature contribute to the manifestation or proliferation of bullying in three ways: (1) enabling structures (or necessary antecedents), (2) motivating structures (or incentives), and (3) precipitating process (or triggering circumstances). Firstly, the enabling structures include conditions for bullying to occur in the first place, including perceived power imbalance, low perceived costs, and dissatisfaction and frustration. In other words, these conditions provide fertile soil for bullying. Secondly, the motivating structures include factors that motivate the occurrence of bullying in the workplace, such as internal competition, reward system and expected benefits, bureaucracy, and difficulties in laying off employees. Thirdly, the precipitating processes include conditions related to changes in the status quo, for example, downsizing and organisational changes in the composition of the workgroup, that trigger bullying. Therefore, workplace bullying can be understood as the result of the interaction between these three groups (or at least two of them) in the framework.

Figure 2.1

Salin's Theoretical Framework Explaining the Development of Bullying



Note. Adapted from Salin (2003)

2.5.6 Theoretical underpinnings for the development of *qiling*

These theories developed in European countries have provided a theoretical understanding on the development of workplace bullying. Informed by constructivist ground theory, the above theoretical model and framework helped the researcher improve theoretical sensitivity for the data analysis of this study. It is crucial to emphasise that these theories functioned as sensitising concepts rather than predefined theoretical frameworks. This aligns with the abductive reasoning characteristic of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), which aims to either formulate novel theories or ingeniously amalgamate existing ones in order to unearth "changed circumstances, additional dimensions, or misguided preconceptions" (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 179).

Although there are various frameworks or models explaining the development of workplace bullying, as discussed in the previous section, Salin's (2003) framework was selected as the theoretical underpinning to further develop and construct the framework of explaining the development of *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen. One of the main reasons is that it emphasises more on the organisational and social environment. In addition, the framework also aligns with the hierarchical and collectivist values of Chinese workplaces. For instance, autocratic leadership styles and role conflicts, mentioned in Salin's (2003) framework, are relevant to the high-power distance and respect for authority deeply rooted in Chinese culture. These factors may create fertile grounds for *qiling* to thrive. On the other hand, the three-way model proposed by Baillien et al. (2009) may not be best suitable for this study to explore the development of *qiling* in the Chinese context. It is because the model focuses on the interaction between the perpetrator, victim, and work environment, and the relationship between organisational antecedents and the cultural and hierarchical norms is less focused. However, organisational antecedents are more important in explaining the proliferation and development of bullying at work (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). Therefore, Salin's (2003) framework was adopted as the theoretical underpinning to explore the development of *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen.

2.6 Is the theoretical understanding of bullying appropriate to all contexts?

While the existing literature provides a comprehensive understanding of workplace bullying, the majority of this research is conducted in European countries and, therefore may not be directly transferable or applicable to the Chinese context. A number of recent studies indicate that different cultural backgrounds can influence the understanding and tolerance of workplace bullying (Grimard & Lee, 2020; León-Pérez et al., 2021; Omari & Paull, 2015; Power et al., 2013; Salin et al., 2019; Salin et al., 2020). Yet, many bullying studies in Asian countries have depended on theoretical definitions models developed in European countries without the consideration of cultural and value differences (McCormack et al., 2009; Stone-Romero et al., 2003; Zhou et al., 2015). For example, scholars argue that a number of theories in management domains are underdeveloped as the impact of culture on the management of employee behaviour is less considered (Lukaszewski et al., 2008). Indeed, employees from Asian cultural backgrounds, such as Chinese culture, are likely to endorse a very different set of cultural values than employees in European countries. Therefore, the conceptualisation of workplace

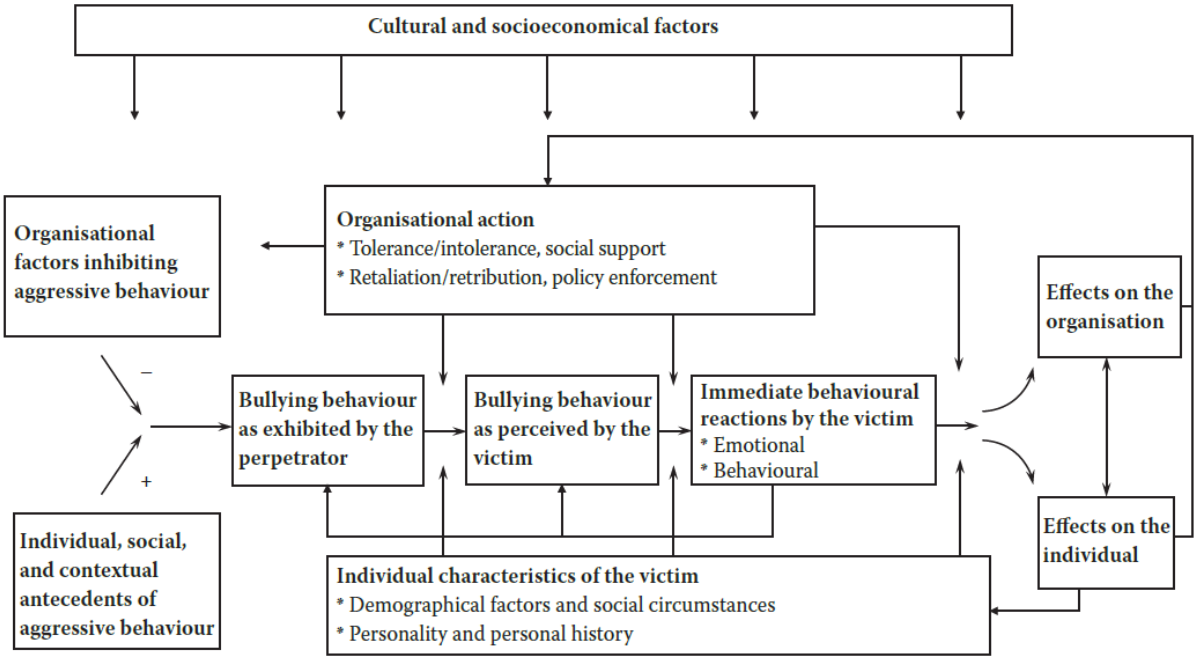
bullying discussed above is unlikely to be able to be directly transferred to understanding employee behaviour in Asian countries, such as China.

In addition, the role of contexts receives little attention in the domains of management (Galvin, 2014). As a result, many HRM-related processes and practices in Asian countries such as China, for example, employment policies and reward systems, are based on European ideologies; thus, they may not be effectively implemented in Chinese organisations (Cox & Griffiths, 1995; Galvin, 2014; Isenhour et al., 2012). Given this, many domestic and international organisations in China have been facing the challenge of developing HRM processes and practices that best suit the Chinese context (Isenhour et al., 2012). An important aspect of HRM that requires consideration is the prevention and management of hazards in the workplace, such as bullying; therefore, research that considers the importance of cultural values is needed in the domain of workplace bullying.

In the same vein, Einarsen et al. (2011) provide a theoretical framework (see Figure 2.2) which identifies key factors for future theoretical developments in the domain of workplace bullying. According to this theoretical framework, cultural and socioeconomic factors affect the understanding and management of workplace bullying. Similarly, according to a cross-cultural study of workplace bullying conducted by Salin et al. (2019), while physical intimidation and personal harassment are recognised as bullying in most European countries, negative acts at work and social exclusion are different in various countries. Therefore, given that the cultural and socioeconomic factors in Asian countries are different from the countries developing the theoretical understanding of workplace bullying, it is essential to explore how workplace bullying is uniquely experienced in the Chinese context.

Figure 2.2

A Theoretical Framework for Studying Workplace Bullying



Note. Adapted from Einarsen et al. (2011)

2.7 Workplace bullying in Asian countries

Workplace bullying is a phenomenon that has been studied extensively in Western countries, but there is a dearth of research on this topic in Eastern countries. As discussed in the previous section, the understanding of the phenomenon comes from Western countries, and this underscores their limited generalisability and applicability to Eastern contexts, such as Asian countries (Ng & Chan, 2021). Indeed, although research on workplace bullying has been conducted internationally for approximately four decades, studies from Asia have been undertaken for around two decades (D'Cruz et al., 2022). Nonetheless, enhancing country-specific understanding is particularly crucial to inform and facilitate the development and implementation of interventions tailored to fit the context. To further examine the role of context in contributing to various understandings of workplace bullying, the nature and development of the phenomenon explored in several Asian countries where there are certain cultural similarities with China, including India, Jordan, Pakistan, South Korea, and Malaysia, are discussed below.

In Indian workplaces, downward bullying is a predominant issue, with its prevalence notably reducing at higher levels of the corporate hierarchy (D'Cruz, 2022). The acceptance of a

significant power distance in society underpins this trend, where superiors maintain strict control and subordinates often expect and accept authoritative leadership (Budhwar, 2009; D'Cruz et al., 2016). This centralisation of power amongst management contributes to an environment conducive to bullying, particularly from those in senior roles (D'Cruz & Rayner, 2013). Despite the cultural preference for leaders who combine authority with concern for their subordinates, the misuse of power can still lead to bullying, especially during times of organisational change when employees may feel their psychological contract has been violated (D'Cruz, 2015; Rai & Agarwal, 2017).

The motivational factors behind leaders' engagement in bullying are diverse, ranging from predatory to dispute-related behaviours, often driven by personal gain in a context where resources are scarce (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2016; D'Cruz et al., 2016). Bullying in India does not occur in isolation but is influenced by social hierarchies, with a tendency to favour subordinates who share or align with the social identities valued by the superiors, thereby discriminating against those from different or less valued backgrounds (Noronha & Sharma, 2003). Such dynamics reveal a complex interaction between individualistic aspirations and the traditional collectivist societal structure, which can lead to favouritism and bullying as managers strive for personal advancement and status (D'Cruz et al., 2014; Sinha, 2015). This may differ from the dominant understanding from Western countries where bullying is typically conceptualised as a universal problem and not necessarily linked to societal hierarchies or social identities.

The macroeconomic environment in India, marked by a volatile and competitive neoliberal capitalist system, also shapes workplace interactions (D'Cruz, 2022; D'Cruz & Noronha, 2014). This situation fosters conditions where both personal and impersonal forms of bullying are prevalent, often leading to compounded issues within the workplace (D'Cruz et al., 2014). Additionally, the entrenched hierarchical societal structure is mirrored in the workplace, where bullying often involves senior staff, reinforcing the existing power imbalances (D'Cruz & Rayner, 2013). Cultural norms that encourage sycophancy can result in employees engaging in bullying to gain favour with their superiors, perpetuating a cycle of abuse and preferential treatment that is deeply rooted in the intricate social fabric of Indian workplaces (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2012). Such systemic bullying, driven by culturally specific practices (e.g., sycophancy), is less evident in workplaces in Western countries where there is a stronger

emphasis on individual rights and legal frameworks to counteract workplace harassment (D'Cruz et al., 2018).

The nature of workplace bullying in Jordan is influenced by the cultural, organisational, and legal factors in the country, which diverge from Western contexts. Evidence indicates a relatively high level of workplace bullying, with about 40% of respondents experiencing negative acts within six months; however, a significant portion remains uncertain if their experiences qualify as bullying (Al Muala & Thirlwall, 2021). This ambiguity is compounded by the absence of widespread anti-bullying policies and a general lack of awareness among employees and management about bullying (Al Muala, 2015). Moreover, a substantial number of incidents occur in the presence of supervisors, suggesting either a lack of capability or willingness to address such issues (Al Muala & Thirlwall, 2021). The cultural factors in Jordan play a pivotal role, where collectivist values and the high regard for maintaining harmony and avoiding shame influence perceptions and reporting of bullying. Additionally, the lack of specific legal recourse for bullying, coupled with insufficient enforcement of existing health and safety regulations, further complicates the situation (Ibáñez Prieto, 2018). The understanding of workplace bullying in Jordan is also shaped by socio-economic conditions, gender norms, and the stigma associated with being a victim, which can deter individuals from speaking out (Thirlwall, 2015). Cultural norms around honour and shame, as well as traditional gender roles, can make acknowledging or addressing bullying particularly challenging (Shteiwi, 2015). The language used to describe bullying and the societal resistance to new concepts may also further hinder the recognition and management of bullying (Al-Wer, 2018).

The attention to workplace bullying in Pakistan has significantly increased, with local studies revealing its widespread prevalence surpassing that documented in European and Australian contexts (Anjum et al., 2019; Imran et al., 2010). Evidence shows that around one-third of Pakistani workers have encountered bullying, with some sectors experiencing rates as high as 80% (Anjum & Shoukat, 2013). Such high levels of bullying are attributed to Pakistan's societal structure, which is marked by substantial power disparities, promoting an environment where such behaviour may be expected and even normalised (Naseer et al., 2018).

The hierarchical social fabric of Pakistan is characterised by high power distance, a condition where power is distributed unequally and accepted as a societal norm (Hofstede, 2001). This power distance is mirrored within organisations, where supervisors exert significant control

over their subordinates. Top-down bullying is a manifestation of this power dynamic, where those in authority may abuse their legitimate power, particularly against subordinates who challenge their authority or outperform them (De Cieri et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2016). Given these circumstances, workplace bullying in Pakistan has become a substantial behavioural issue within organisations. The misuse of hierarchical power often leads to bullying, particularly when subordinates question their superiors or when they are seen as a threat due to their superior job performance. This environment not only fosters such behaviours but also allows them to continue with little check, indicating a need for systemic change to address the issue at its core (Ahmad et al., 2017; Khan et al., 2016).

In the workplace of South Korea, bullying is often a collective phenomenon, known locally as the Korean term 'wang-tta' (Lee & Lee, 2019). This reflects the strong emphasis on group cohesion and social harmony prevalent in Korean culture. Individuals who stand out or are perceived as disruptive to the group's equilibrium are at risk of becoming targets. Such discriminatory behaviour can lead to conflicts within the group, which may escalate to bullying (Kim, 2016). Similarly, the term 'tae-wum' or 'tae-wu-gi', meaning 'to burn something', has been used in the media to describe damaging actions within the nursing sector, including both physical and psychological abuse, often rationalised as a means to improve efficiency (Lee, 2020).

Unlike many of the European countries emphasising individualism, South Korea is a collectivist country under the influence of Confucianism. According to a comparative study between South Korea and the UK, Seo (2010) found that definitional elements of bullying in South Korea, such as harming behaviour and power imbalance, are similar to the UK; however, the most distinctive element in South Korea was bullying as a group act. This can mean that workplace bullying in South Korea is more likely to occur as a form of group behaviour rather than as an individual behaviour. This element was different from the lay British definition that bullying is primarily defined as harmful acts coming from a senior member and being relevant to a power imbalance (Seo, 2010). In addition, South Korean employees also expressed a certain degree of justification for bullying, which is not mentioned by British employees. Specifically, given the impact of the widespread military culture and collectivism in South Korea, bullying can be considered as a type of motivation strategy to improve employee efficiency (Kim, 2006), and was acceptable if there was an appropriate reason (Yoo & Lee, 2018). Under the influence of collectivism, South Korean employees may pay more attention

to group benefits and harmony than individual feelings (Lee, 2012); therefore, bullying was likely to occur and develop if individuals do not follow the opinions of the majority or group in organisations.

The exploration of workplace bullying in Malaysia is still emerging. Despite Malaysia being a multicultural society with diverse values and religious beliefs, Malaysians demonstrate consistent cultural norms within the country's patriarchal framework. For instance, they hold high respect for individuals of higher authority, age, and position, often emphasising the significance of seniority within society, which is evident in power distance and a hierarchical culture (Lim, 2001; Zawawi, 2008). Malaysian workplaces are frequently characterised as collectivist, hierarchical, and relationship-oriented (Abdullah, 1994). These traits manifest in employees showing greater deference and compliance towards those in positions of authority, who typically hold sway over employees' roles, positions, and decision-making within the organisation. Consequently, hierarchical structures prevail in most workplaces, with older employees often occupying higher positions. Moreover, to uphold positive reputations and foster harmonious relationships in the workplace, Malaysian employees are less inclined to engage in confrontational behaviours with their superiors while fulfilling their duties within the organisation. Indeed, these workplace dynamics and broader societal norms reflect remnants of the Malay feudal system, where those in higher positions held supremacy, and the leader-employee relationship was clearly delineated (Conrad & Nash, 2012). Despite the cessation of feudal practices in contemporary Malaysia, their influence persists in shaping the country's cultural landscape (Sweetman, 2012). The indirect nature of bullying, such as the denial of deserved promotions or benefits, highlights the subtlety and complexity of addressing bullying in the Malaysian workplace context (Kwan et al., 2020).

Prevalence studies indicate a significant number of Malaysian employees, both in healthcare and public service sectors, encounter workplace bullying, with reported rates suggesting that a considerable proportion of the workforce has experienced some form of negative behaviour (Yusop et al., 2014; Omar et al., 2015). The impact of bullying is also seen affecting career aspirations, with employees reconsidering their professional pathways post negative experiences (Patah & Abdullah, 2010). Furthermore, differences in susceptibility to bullying have been observed between local and foreign workers, implying socioeconomic factors may influence vulnerability to workplace bullying (Yahaya et al., 2012; Tsuno et al., 2015).

The findings imply that Malaysian employees may have unique perceptions and coping mechanisms regarding workplace bullying. This distinction is critical for understanding the full scope of the issue and for the development of effective workplace policies and support systems that can mitigate the prevalence of bullying and its adverse effects on employees' well-being and career paths.

Kwan et al. (2014) also found the perception of workplace bullying in Malaysia is different from the dominant understanding developed in Western countries. Similar to South Korea, Malaysia is a country with a high level of collectivism and is influenced in part by the teachings of Confucianism (Ling, 2019). Based on this grounded theory study, workplace bullying in Malaysia is conceptualised as "being intimidating, persecuting, or offending behaviour with the intention to harm and victimise someone due to a power imbalance; this behaviour causes physical and psychological distress to the target of the bullying" (Kwan et al., 2014, p. 230). While the Malaysian definition of workplace bullying includes similar elements such as harmful behaviour and power imbalance, the character "frequency and duration" is not considered in the Malaysian context (Kwan et al., 2014).

Furthermore, Kwan et al. (2020) developed a new measurement scale, called the Malaysian Workplace Bullying Index (MWBI), for measuring workplace bullying in the Malaysian context. As shown in Table 2.3, The measurement scale included 18 validated bullying behaviours which differ from other Western measurement scales, such as the NAQ-R. This shows that bullying behaviours developed in Western countries may not be understood and agreed upon by Eastern countries (Kwan et al., 2020). Therefore, although the Western scales have high levels of internal reliability, given a lack of cultural consideration, they cannot comprehensively measure the prevalence of workplace bullying in Asian countries.

Table 2.3

Bullying Behaviours Listed in the MWBI

Work-related bullying	1. Being requested to do work which is out of the job scope 2. Being requested to do work that is not within one's ability 3. Being requested to do unnecessary work which is not relevant to the job description 4. Being requested to do an excessive amount of work 5. Being requested to work overtime without pay 6. Being requested to do work which is supposed to be done by other co-workers

	7. Being asked to do work alone without assistance 8. Being instructed to do work without guidance 9. Being forced to do work to meet deadlines
Person-related bullying	10. Having credit for the work taken by someone else 11. Being coerced or threaten to do work 12. Being threatened that privileges will be taken away by someone else 13. Being wrongly blamed if something is wrong 14. Being taken advantage of 15. Being scolded without relevant reason 16. Being make fun of 17. Being talked about behind one's back 18. Having rumours spread about oneself

Note. Adapted from Kwan et al. (2020)

2.8 Summary

Based on the above literature review, the theoretical understanding of bullying, including its characteristics and definition, consequences, and antecedents, has been well studied in Western countries. However, given cultural and socioeconomic differences, the dominant understandings developed from Western countries may not be fully transferable to Asian countries, such as India, Jordan, South Korea, Malaysia, and China. Therefore, to further strengthen bullying literature, obtaining a comprehensive understanding of workplace bullying in the Chinese context is crucial to further contribute to knowledge on a global understanding of bullying.

CHAPTER THREE: WORKPLACE BULLYING IN CHINA

3.1 Chapter overview

The previous chapter reviewed the dominant understanding of workplace bullying developed in European countries. Chapter 3 will introduce the context of China and discuss existing literature about workplace bullying in the context. This chapter will start by introducing the Chinese context (section 3.2), including the institutional and cultural factors relating to the experience of Chinese employees, as well as explaining the research context (i.e., Shenzhen). Following this discussion, the Chinese term for workplace bullying will be explained from lay and academic understandings (section 3.3). Finally, a review of the limited workplace bullying literature within the Chinese context will be presented in Section 3.4.

3.2 Understanding the Chinese context

Institutional and cultural factors in a context can be considered as the foundation upon which new concepts and theories are developed (Barkema et al., 2015; Filatotchev et al., 2020). Given that the majority of concepts and theories of management and organisations, such as bullying, were developed in European contexts (Barkema et al., 2015), understanding Asian contexts, such as the institutional and cultural factors in China, is crucial to developing concepts and theories that emerged from the contexts (Budhwar et al., 2016; Yao et al., 2020). The following sections will discuss the institutional and cultural factors relating to the bullying experience of Chinese employees. In addition, the research context in this study (i.e., Shenzhen, China) will also be introduced.

3.2.1 Institutional factors relating to the experience of Chinese employees

In terms of the institutional factors in China, the political system and occupational policies will be discussed.

3.2.1.1 Political system of China

One of the most significant institutional factors of China is its political system led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Based on this political system, the CCP has absolute power to make decisions on various aspects, such as policy making and even business innovation and changes across the country (Miao et al., 2014). Further, governmental bureaucracy remains a substantial component of the organizational hierarchy, exerting direct influence on human resource practices, including selection and promotion, especially within state-owned

enterprises. These enterprises, being subject to government monitoring and funding, are particularly impacted by governmental bureaucratic processes (Lü & Perry, 2015). For example, membership of the Party (党员) is often required for leadership positions in Chinese organisations, mainly state-owned and large-scale organisations, and the Party members can provide significant advantages in terms of career advancement (Shih et al., 2012). In addition, the official Marxist philosophy of the CCP is also significantly affected by Confucianism, which stresses hierarchy and collective harmony (Zhang & Chen, 2022). Given that the CCP has ruled for more than seven decades, these beliefs are more likely to be established in the value systems of Chinese employees and managers. Accordingly, this may affect how they perceive bullying behaviour at work.

3.2.1.2 Occupational Laws

Although the occupational health and safety laws in China have been protecting employees' rights and benefits in the workplace, policies relating to workplace bullying have not been developed in the country (Xiao & Peng, 2014). As summarised in Table 3.1, there are two main laws relating to employees' health and safety: the Labour Law of the People's Republic of China (published in 1995, revised in 2018) and the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (published in 1982, revised in 2018). These two laws clearly point out some specific negative behaviours that are illegal in the workplace, for example, physical violence, threats, and insults. However, employees suffering from bullying at work are less likely to be protected by these Laws as there is no clear regulation which directly mentions or fully covers bullying behaviours in the workplace.

Table 3.1

Chinese Laws Relating to Workplace Bullying

Law	Regulations
Labour Law of the People's Republic of China	• Workers have the right to equal employment and choice of occupation, the right to obtain labour remuneration, the right to rest and vacation, the right to obtain labour safety and health protection, the right to receive vocational skills training, the right to enjoy social insurance and welfare, and the right to submit labour disputes for settlement. Rights and other labour rights stipulated by law (No. 3; Ch. 1).

	• The labourer can notify the employer to terminate the labour contract at any time. When the employer forces labour by violence, threats or illegal restrictions on personal freedom (No. 18; Ch. 3). • The state implements a working hour system in which workers work no more than eight hours a day and an average weekly working time of no more than 44 hours (No. 36; Ch. 4). • Due to the needs of production and operation, the employer may extend the working hours after consultation with the trade union and the laborers, generally not exceeding one hour per day; if the working hours need to be extended due to special reasons, the working hours shall be extended on the condition that the health of the laborers is guaranteed. The day shall not exceed three hours, but the month shall not exceed thirty-six hours (No. 40; Ch. 4). • In the event of a labour dispute between an employer and a worker, the parties may apply for mediation, arbitration, or file a lawsuit in accordance with the law, or they may resolve it through negotiation (No. 77; Ch. 10). • If the employing unit commits any of the following acts, the public security organ shall detain the responsible person for not more than 15 days, impose a fine or give a warning; if a crime is constituted, the responsible person shall be investigated for criminal responsibility according to law: ■ Forced labour by means of violence, threats or illegal restrictions on personal freedom; ■ Insulting, physically punishing, beating, illegally searching and detaining workers (No. 96; Ch. 12).
Constitution of the People's Republic of China	• The personal dignity of citizens of the People's Republic of China shall not be violated. Insulting, slandering and falsely accusing citizens by any means are prohibited (No. 38; Ch. 2).

	• Workers in the People's Republic of China have the right to rest. The state develops facilities for workers to rest and recuperate and stipulates the working hours and vacation system for workers (No. 43; Ch. 2). • The state protects the rights and interests of women, implements equal pay for men and women for equal work, and trains and selects women cadres (No. 48; Ch. 2).

As China has been paying more attention to employees' health and wellbeing (Triandis, 2018), obtaining an in-depth understanding of workplace bullying to develop anti-bullying policies is crucial. According to the Decent Work Country Programme (International Labour Organization, 2020), it proposed three priorities indicating that the health and safety of employees in China will be improved in the next decade. These three priorities and their outcomes are summarised in Table 3.2. Given that workplace bullying can cause severe consequences to employees, the Government in China should develop anti-bullying policies to prevent and intervene in workplace bullying in order to better achieve the priorities.

Table 3.2

Priorities and Outcomes of the Decent Work Country Programme

Priority	Outcomes
Increase the quantity and quality of employment	• The capacity of government and social partners to assess and quantify employment quality strengthened with a view to decent work and sustainable development advocacy. • The capacity of government and social partners to develop and implement inclusive and gender responsive employment policy interventions with a view to promoting freely chosen and productive employment strengthened. • The quality and accessibility of rights-based employment services for rural migrant workers, young women and men improved, with a view to substantially reducing the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training.

Promote and extend social protection in and out of the workplace	• Government and social partners have taken measures to end poverty in all its forms by realising universal and adequate social protection. • Workplace compliance is improved to better protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers in line with national laws and regulations and international standards, through strengthened labour inspection and increased preventative organisational safety and health (OSH) culture.
Strengthen the rule of law and the realization of fundamental principles and rights at work	• Institutions for negotiating working conditions, protecting labour rights for all workers, and preventing and resolving labour disputes are improved, in line with international standards and Chinese laws and regulations. • The capacity of workers' and employers' organizations as labour market institutions is strengthened, with a view to ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels, consistent with national and international standards. • The government is continuously strengthening the rule of law at national and international levels by ratifying and, with social partners' involvement, improving the application of international labour standards.

Note. Adapted from International Labour Organization (2020)

3.2.2 Cultural factors relating to the experience of Chinese employees

The contemporary culture of China is shaped by a blend of tradition and rapid modernisation. Traditional Chinese culture can be considered as a combination of three main value systems, including Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Although Buddhism and Taoism play an important role in contemporary Chinese societies and organisations (Tao, 2017), Confucianism has been widely recognised by scholars in the domain of Chinese culture as the cornerstone of the Chinese cultural system, which affects behaviours in the workplace (Vermander, 2011; Yao et al., 2020). Confucianism plays a pivotal role in delineating appropriate conduct and human connections within Chinese and other Asian settings, spanning countries such as South Korea

and Malaysia (Vermander, 2011). Confucian culture leans toward a greater emphasis on the past compared to the present and future (Zhou & Fan, 2015). With an extensive history spanning five millennia, the Chinese populace exhibits a proclivity for tradition and often prioritises safeguarding one's reputation (*mianzi*) and upholding reciprocity (Yang et al., 2020).

While Chinese culture is dynamic and complicated, four traditional Confucian values have been widely recognised in previous literature in terms of influencing workplace behaviours, such as (1) harmony, (2) family-oriented collectivism, (3) the importance of relationships (*guanxi*), and (4) respect for hierarchy (Redding, 2002; Warner, 2010; Wong et al., 2010; Yao et al., 2020). First, maintaining harmony within a group is often prioritised over individual needs and desires. This cultural value can lead to a focus on group harmony and avoiding conflict in the workplace (Lau et al., 2021). Employees in China may be reluctant to speak out against authority figures or disagree with colleagues in order to maintain a harmonious work environment (Yao et al., 2020). In addition, the value can also influence the way in which employees communicate in the workplace. For example, indirect communication is often favoured over direct communication, and employees may use non-verbal cues or speak in an indirect manner in order to maintain harmony and avoid confrontation in the Chinese workplace (Yao et al., 2020). Further, this value can also lead to a high level of employee loyalty and commitment to the organisation (Fan et al., 2021). For example, employees may feel a strong sense of loyalty to their employer and prioritise group harmony over their own individual needs. However, this value may lead to negative consequences for employees. For example, employees may avoid addressing conflicts or problems in the workplace in order to maintain harmony (Ye et al., 2019). This may lead to a lack of transparency and accountability, which can ultimately harm themselves as well as the organisation.

Second, the value of family-oriented collectivism stresses the importance of family and understanding the differences between in-groups and out-groups. In the Chinese workplace, teamwork and collaboration are highly valued, and employees may place a strong emphasis on building and maintaining relationships with colleagues (Yao et al., 2020). Employees may prioritise the needs of their family and colleagues over their own individual needs (Zhu et al., 2022). However, this value may lead employees to consider the feelings and opinions of colleagues more than their own feelings, for example, the feelings of facing unfair treatment from colleagues and managers. Given the influence of the cultural values of collectivism and

harmony, victims tend to keep silent on these negative behaviours, such as bullying, and bystanders are also likely to turn a blind eye to this issue (Guo et al., 2015).

Third, the importance of relationships (*guanxi*) refers to the need to maintain and nurture relationships so that mutual trust ensues. *Guanxi* has a significant influence on employee behaviour in China. It is a unique Chinese term referring to a bond or connection between at least two individuals to conduct a bilateral flow for personal or social benefits (Burt & Burzynska, 2017). Previous literature states that *guanxi* is essential for building a successful career. Employees who have strong *guanxi* with managers are often viewed as more trustworthy and reliable (Rong et al., 2021; Tong & Yong, 2014), and they are more likely to receive promotions and opportunities for advancement (Ma et al., 2015). However, *guanxi* may also be negatively used as a power to conduct unethical behaviour, for example, taking advantage of *guanxi* to harm the interests of colleagues (Wu et al., 2019).

Fourth, the value of respect for hierarchy means that social hierarchy and relations of subordination and superiority are considered natural and proper (Yao et al., 2020). This value is also associated with the high level of power distance in China (Hofstede, 2001). In the Chinese workplace, employees are expected to show respect and deference to their managers. The value can manifest in a variety of ways, for example, addressing superiors with formal titles, using polite language, and avoiding direct confrontation or criticism (Beckers & Bsat, 2014). Therefore, when facing bullying behaviour from managers, employees may avoid rejecting it due to this traditional cultural value.

In addition to the above traditional Chinese cultural values, China is experiencing a cultural shift due to the impact of globalisation. Therefore, contemporary Chinese culture has become much more complex, and it involves traditional values as well as individualism and capitalism (Zeng & Greenfield, 2015). Individualism is a typical cultural value in many European and North American countries. However, China has experienced a shift towards individualism in recent years, and the value has influenced employee behaviour in the country, particularly for young employees (Li & Sun, 2015). The value of individualism contributes to increasing the emphasis on job satisfaction and personal fulfilment (Triandis, 2018). Similarly, Chinese employees are paying more attention to health and well-being in the workplace as well as work-life balance (Zeng & Greenfield, 2015). In addition, due to the influence of individualism, employees in China may be increasingly seeking to maximise their own earnings and benefits,

rather than focusing solely on the interests of the organisation and colleagues (Spector et al., 2017).

The value of capitalism has also obtained increasing prominence in China over the past few decades, as the country has transitioned from a socialist planned economy to a more market-oriented system (Aho & Duffield, 2020). Given the impact of capitalism, employees in China are more likely to be motivated by the potential for financial gain, including competitive salaries, bonuses, and other forms of competition (Coase & Wang, 2016). This can lead to a growing focus on performance-based pay and individual performance metrics, as well as a greater emphasis on skills development and training to increase marketability in the labour market. However, capitalism may promote the severe internal competition within an organisation due to the limited resources.

As explained above, contemporary Chinese culture becomes complex and is a mixture of traditional Chinese cultural values, individualism and capitalism. Given the influence of the complex culture and situational factors in China, the nature and development of workplace bullying may be different from European countries, where most of the bullying research has been conducted to date. Therefore, based on the understanding of the contemporary culture and institutional factors in China, this study aimed to explore the nature and development of workplace bullying grounded from an employee's perspective in a Chinese context.

3.2.3 The research context – Shenzhen, China

Shenzhen is a vibrant city located in the Guangdong Province of China. In terms of its economic development, the city has experienced tremendous economic growth and development in the last four decades (Hao et al., 2011; Luo, 2020). The city's economy is largely driven by its manufacturing and service sectors, which have attracted numerous businesses and entrepreneurs from both within and outside of China (Du, 2020). As a result, the city has become a hub for innovation and entrepreneurship, which has created numerous job opportunities for residents. Given the impact of the rapid economic growth and development in the city, employees in Shenzhen are known for their strong work ethic and dedication to their jobs. Many employees are willing to work long hours and are highly motivated to succeed in their careers.

The city is also known for its high level of diversity. It is home to a large number of migrant employees from various regions of China as well as other countries, which prompts a diverse and dynamic workforce (Luo & Chan, 2021). The diverse and dynamic workforce in Shenzhen has also influenced the behaviour of employees (Dumont et al., 2017). For example, employees in this city have a high level of adaptability and flexibility and are able to work in diverse teams and are able to adapt to changing circumstances and business environments (Zhu et al., 2014). In addition, the city also has an attractive regulatory environment for both organisations and employees, including pro-business policies and talent attraction measures (e.g., attractive compensation and benefits, application of *hukou* (residency), and housing subsidy) (Giap et al., 2014; Zeng, 2012; Zeng, 2021). Therefore, an increasing number of employees from other regions of China and countries are attracted to work in Shenzhen, and this motivates internal competition within an organisation. To explore the nature and development of employee behaviour in contemporary Chinese workplaces, the context of Shenzhen would be an appropriate starting point.

3.3 Chinese language – *Qiling*

Considerations around language and translation are crucial in cross-cultural research (Kwan et al., 2020; Lou et al., 2021; Teig et al., 2023), particularly with an issue like bullying that already has variations in its conceptualisation (Kang & Yun, 2016; Kwan et al., 2020; Kwan et al., 2014; Seo, 2010). To explore the understanding of workplace bullying in the Chinese context, the translation of the English word *bullying* should be initially addressed. The following sections will explore how the English word *bullying* is mostly translated into the Chinese term *qiling* from two perspectives, including lay and academic understandings.

3.3.1 Lay understanding

According to the Cambridge English-Chinese Dictionary (2020), the word *bullying* is more likely to be literally translated to *qiling* (欺凌) in Chinese (Simplified) than its synonyms, such as *qifu* (欺负) and *baling* (霸凌). *Qiling* is a term with a long history in China and has been widely used in ancient Chinese poems and works dating back to the Southern Tang dynasty (937 to 975). This is one of the reasons why Chinese employees are familiar with bullying in relation to sharing experiences of bullying at work. According to the latest version of the Contemporary Chinese Dictionary, which is the most inclusive available Chinese dictionary, the term *qiling* has been defined as “bullying and humiliating” (Chinese Academy of Social

Sciences, 2016). The word *bullying* in English cannot be separated into words; however, unlike the English language, the term *qiling* in Chinese consists of two Chinese characters: *qi* (欺) and *ling* (凌). According to the Xinhua Dictionary (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2020), which is the world's most popular Chinese dictionary for understanding individual Chinese characters, the characters *qi* and *ling* are mostly used as verbs describing bullying, and their explanations are summarised in Table 3.3. Therefore, the English word *bullying* can be literally translated into the Chinese term *qiling*.

Table 3.3

Explanations of the Chinese Characters Qi and Ling

	***Qi* (欺)**	***Ling* (凌)**
Verb	Deceive, cheat, **bully**, blackmail and fraud	Store up ice, place oneself above, **bully**, **encroach on**, **insult**, invade, soar, tremble, run, close in on, ride, and cross
Noun	-	Ice and the surname Ling
Adjective	-	Cold, in disorder

The term *qiling* has also been widely used as a translation of bullying in Chinese mainstream social media. For example, news agencies such as Xinhuanet and Chinanews use this term as the translation for bullying (Chinanews, 2021; Xinhuanet, 2017, 2019). The general Chinese public also uses the term *qiling* to share experiences of workplace bullying in Chinese social media platforms, such as Weibo and Zhihu. As a result, using the term *qiling* as a translation of the English word *bullying* is appropriate to the public, especially for Chinese employees as the participants in this study, to explore their bullying experiences.

3.3.2 Academic understanding

The existing academic bullying literature in China has most frequently used the term *qiling* to refer to bullying. For example, in a Chinese article exploring bullying experiences in China, Guo et al. (2015) adopted *qiling* as the direct translation for bullying, and used the European definition provided by Keashly and Jagatic (2002). In their study, the authors used the term *qiling* as the translation of bullying, and it is defined as a series of different forms of physical and psychological abuse in the workplace through repeated negative verbal and nonverbal communication (Keashly & Jagatic, 2002). Similarly, another Chinese article also translated

and explained several European definitions of bullying and then used the Chinese term *qiling* to refer to bullying (Xiao & Peng, 2014). In addition, the literature on other types of bullying such as school bullying (Yang & Bi, 2016) and cyberbullying (Li, 2009), had broadly used the term *qiling* as a translation of the English word bullying. More importantly, in terms of bullying, *qiling* was the only Chinese term that was adopted by the World Health Organization (2023). While these studies adopted the definition of workplace bullying developed in European countries for exploring *qiling* in the Chinese context, the above arguments made in sections 2.6 and 3.2 indicated that bullying in China may not necessarily be understood and defined in the same way. Therefore, the researcher used the term *qiling* for the understanding of bullying grounded in the Chinese context and bullying for its dominant understanding developed in European contexts.

3.4 A review of workplace bullying literature in the Chinese context

While workplace bullying has been well understood in many countries, mostly in European countries, it receives relatively less attention in China. Existing studies have provided some insights into workplace bullying in the Chinese context, such as its measurement, prevalence, consequences, and antecedents. However, a systematic review summarising these studies does not exist. Therefore, to realise how workplace bullying has been understood in China, conducting a systematic literature review is necessary. Given this purpose, the researcher carried out a search of English databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Business Source Complete. In addition, three major Chinese databases, including China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), CQVIP, and Wanfang, were used to search Chinese journal articles. The review focused on identifying workplace bullying studies in China using the keywords shown in Table 3.4. The initial research obtained 348 publications. The inclusion criteria included descriptive and empirical studies on workplace bullying in a Chinese context, published in English and Chinese until February 2023. After reading the abstracts of these publications, the majority of them were excluded as they were not relevant to the research topic and context. As a result, a total of 42 studies fulfilled the inclusion criteria from the search results. These studies can be divided into three main perspectives, including the prevalence, consequences, and individual antecedents of workplace bullying.

Table 3.4

Keywords for Searching Literature

Concept	Search Terms	
	English	Chinese
Workplace	Work OR workplace OR organisation* OR organization* OR "at work"	职场 OR 工作场所
Bullying	Bully* OR harassment OR harass* OR mobbing OR "horizontal violence" OR "lateral violence" OR "psychological harassment" OR incivilit*	欺凌 OR 欺负 OR 霸凌
China	China OR Chinese	中国

3.4.1 Prevalence of workplace bullying in China

To measure the prevalence of workplace bullying, the European measurement scale Negative Act Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R) has been used frequently in the Chinese context. Scholars examined that the NAQ-R can be used to measure the prevalence of workplace bullying in China (Hua et al., 2015; Ng & Chan, 2021; Yang & Zhou, 2021). However, the understanding of bullying in China, such as its nature and behaviours, seems different from the West due to cultural differences, for example, languages, policies, and religions (Fu et al., 2014). Given this, Li et al. (2010) developed the Chinese workplace bullying scale (CWBS) based on the Chinese context. The CWBS scale categorised bullying behaviours into three factors, including, personal derogation, work-related harassment, and social exclusion, which are similar to the categorisation of the NAQ and NAQ-R. However, the concepts expressed in the work-related harassment and social isolation factors of the CWBS were relatively narrower than those reflected in the corresponding factors in the NAQ and NAQ-R (Li et al., 2010). In terms of the CWBS, the work-related factor is confined to the bullying behaviours of a person in a superior position to a subordinate. In comparison, the work-related harassment factor in the NAQ refers to bullying behaviours of a superior to subordinates, as well as behaviours exhibited between colleagues. While the CWBS has identified some behaviours by directly using the European definition of workplace bullying, the use of the definition may lead to bias for participants; therefore, the participants were not able to explain their own understanding of bullying. This means that the nature of bullying and its behaviours in the Chinese workplace, grounded from an employee's perspective, have not been well explored.

Empirical studies have examined that workplace bullying has been highly prevalent in China, and the prevalence may be influenced by several factors, such as marital status, gender, seniority, enterprise nature, and income. According to a survey adopting the NAQ-R to investigate the prevalence of workplace bullying in Chinese health centres, around 16 per cent of operating room nurses experienced workplace bullying. However, married nurses and female nurses are more likely to suffer from bullying in the workplace (Yang & Zhou, 2021). In addition, the prevalence is also different by age. For example, approximately 70 per cent of young nurses experienced bullying, and around 20 per cent of them experienced middle or high levels of bullying (Zhang et al., 2020). Further, using both the self-reported and NAQ-R approaches to measure the prevalence of workplace bullying in China, Hua et al. (2015) investigated that the prevalence in commercial enterprises (self-reported: 23.0%; NAQ-R: 14.6%) is more severe than in public sectors (self-reported: 13.1%; NAQ-R: 5.6%). The prevalence is also associated with individual incomes. Based on a survey using the CWBS to measure the prevalence of workplace bullying in Chinese employees in Hong Kong, Ng and Chan (2021) found that approximately 60 per cent of the employees experienced bullying at work and around 40 per cent of the employees' experienced bullying at work every year. They also proposed that employees with a higher monthly income are less likely to experience bullying than those who have a lower monthly income (Ng & Chan, 2021). Although the measurement scales need to be further developed by understanding the nature of bullying, the above scales have provided some evidence for the prevalence of workplace bullying in China.

3.4.2 Consequences of workplace bullying in China

The literature in this sample reports that workplace bullying results in harmful consequences for both employees and organisations in China. From an employee's perspective, Sims and Sun (2012) examine that when employees work in an environment in which they witness bullying, they are more likely to report physical or emotional strain and reduced job satisfaction than those who do not witness bullying. In addition, as bullying can be considered as a negative interpersonal interaction damaging individual resources, employees who have experienced bullying may remain silent at work to protect resources (Liu et al., 2020). Bullying can lead to negative impacts not only on victims themselves but also on their family members as it alters their temper in the family environment. Specifically, children's mental and physical health and daily and academic performance are likely to be negatively influenced by the poor parenting of bullied employees due to depressed feelings (Ng, 2019). In addition, based on a survey of

nurses in China, bullying can lead to burnout, and workplace spirituality may reduce the incidence of bullying (Fan et al., 2022). Similarly, bullying may reduce the quality of life for nurses in China (Peng et al., 2022).

Workplace bullying can also cause severe consequences in organisations in China. Employees suffering from bullying in the workplace have a higher level of intention to leave than those who have not experienced bullying in the Chinese workplace (McCormack et al., 2009; Qi et al., 2022; Zhao & Chang, 2019). In the relationship between experiences of bullying and intention to leave, employees with stronger self-esteem are less likely to quit their jobs when suffering from bullying at work (Li et al., 2020). Similarly, employees experiencing bullying are less likely to share knowledge in the workplace (Cheo, 2017); this may reduce the communication between team members and the research efficiency. In addition, employees who experience bullying are more likely to reduce work performance (Tang et al., 2018) and experience increased job burnout (Yang & Zhou, 2021).

3.4.3 Individual antecedents of workplace bullying in China

In relation to the antecedents of workplace bullying in the Chinese context, it seems that these bullying studies pay more attention to individual rather than organisational factors. Evidence indicates that personality characteristics play an important role in contributing to workplace bullying (Zhang et al., 2020). In addition, other individual factors, such as, age, gender, and *hukou* (legally registered residence), are likely to be risk factors for experiencing bullying at work (Cheo, 2017; Wang et al., 2022). In terms of cultural factors, Guo et al. (2015) identified three cultural factors related to workplace bullying in China, including (1) familism and relational determinism, (2) authoritarianism and hierarchical notion, and (3) the doctrine of the mean Confucian and social orientation. As a finding of this study, these factors can affect both individuals' and organisations' perceptions and responses to workplace bullying. These above studies provided evidence to prompt future research to further understand workplace bullying in the country. However, these studies only focused on the role of individual factors and traditional Chinese cultural factors in workplace bullying, and there are no empirical studies exploring the organisational antecedents in the Chinese context. More importantly, there is no theoretical framework developed in the Chinese context to explain the development of bullying. Therefore, the current study builds on this work by exploring how these and other contemporary cultural factors develop into bullying and how organisational factors influence the development of bullying in the Chinese workplace.

3.5 Summary

Based on the review, it can be concluded that the literature on workplace bullying in China is very scant and mainly focuses on three main areas: prevalence, consequences and individual antecedents. Most of the studies conducted in China directly translated and used the European definition and measurement scales to explore the dynamics of workplace bullying in China. However, no literature explored the nature and development of workplace bullying in the Chinese context, nor its organisational antecedents; therefore, a consideration of how the Chinese culture affects the nature and development of workplace bullying warrants further attention. According to the above literature review, exploring the understanding of bullying within the Chinese context is crucial as it is the foundation for prevention and management strategies. Therefore, this research focused on the question of: How do Chinese employees experience workplace bullying in the workplaces of Shenzhen.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

4.1 Chapter overview

This chapter discusses the methodology used in this research to address the two research questions. Firstly, section 4.2 introduces the philosophical paradigm of the researcher (i.e., pragmatism) followed by section 4.3 which provides a justification of the research methodology (i.e., constructivist grounded theory). Following this section, the data collection method, including participant selection criteria (section 4.4), sampling methods (section 4.5), Reflection on challenges of data collection (section 4.6), the summary of the participants (section 4.7), and the interview process (section 4.8), are discussed. Next, the process of data analysis (section 4.9), theoretical saturation (section 4.10), and ethical considerations of this research (section 4.11) are explained respectively. Finally, section 4.12 discusses the methodological rigour of this study.

4.2 Philosophical position – Pragmatism

The research design started by identifying the researcher's philosophical position (i.e., pragmatism). Identifying the researcher's philosophical position was considered as the cornerstone of the research design, which guided the selection of the research method (Bell et al., 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2018). As Guba (1990) defined, the term paradigm referred to "a basic set of beliefs that guide action" (p. 17). Creswell and Creswell (2017) suggested that a paradigm is regarded as a common philosophical orientation about the nature of research, and researchers bring it to their study. This study was positioned within a pragmatic paradigm. This paradigm prioritises usefulness as the objective of knowledge creation, and its advocates consider pragmatism as a superior vehicle for bringing change (Parvaiz et al., 2016). According to Wicks and Freeman (1998), one of the important questions for pragmatists was "whether or not information (scientific data, a novel, a treatise on ethics) is useful—useful in the sense of helping people to better cope with the world or to create better organizations" (p. 129). With this in mind, pragmatists aimed to adopt the most appropriate methodology to address research questions through the knowledge that it generates (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Given a pragmatic philosophical position, the researcher justified a qualitative constructivist grounded theory approach, which was described in the following section, as the most effective research design and method to address the research questions.

4.3 Justification of research methodology

Given a pragmatic philosophical position, the research justified the qualitative research design and constructivist grounded theory approach to address the research questions.

4.3.1 Qualitative research design

This study aimed to understand the nature and development of *qiling* in a Chinese context from an employee's perspective. Given the considerations of three major research strategies, such as qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. Qualitative research referred to an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning that individuals or groups assign to a social or human problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Qualitative studies aimed to explore inquiries related to social construction and lived experiences, delving into how meanings are constructed (Bell et al., 2022). Moreover, qualitative researchers subscribed to the belief that the nature of reality is socially constructed and that contextual factors played a pivotal role in shaping the research inquiry (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Adopting a qualitative research design was also valuable for studying sensitive behavioural phenomena, for example, exploring the understanding of workplace bullying (Fahie, 2014). In comparison, quantitative research was defined as a strategy for testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables (Bell et al., 2022). Quantitative researchers tended to make use of the positivist approach and focus on statistical measurement and analysis (Mohajan, 2020). Table 4.1 indicates the fundamental differences between qualitative and quantitative research strategies. Mixed methods research combined both qualitative and quantitative research to address research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Given that this exploratory study was interested in obtaining an in-depth understanding of *qiling* in the Chinese context rather than testing a theory or examining the relationship between variables, a qualitative research design was considered as the most appropriate methodology to address the research questions.

Table 4.1

Differences between Quantitative and Qualitative Research Strategies

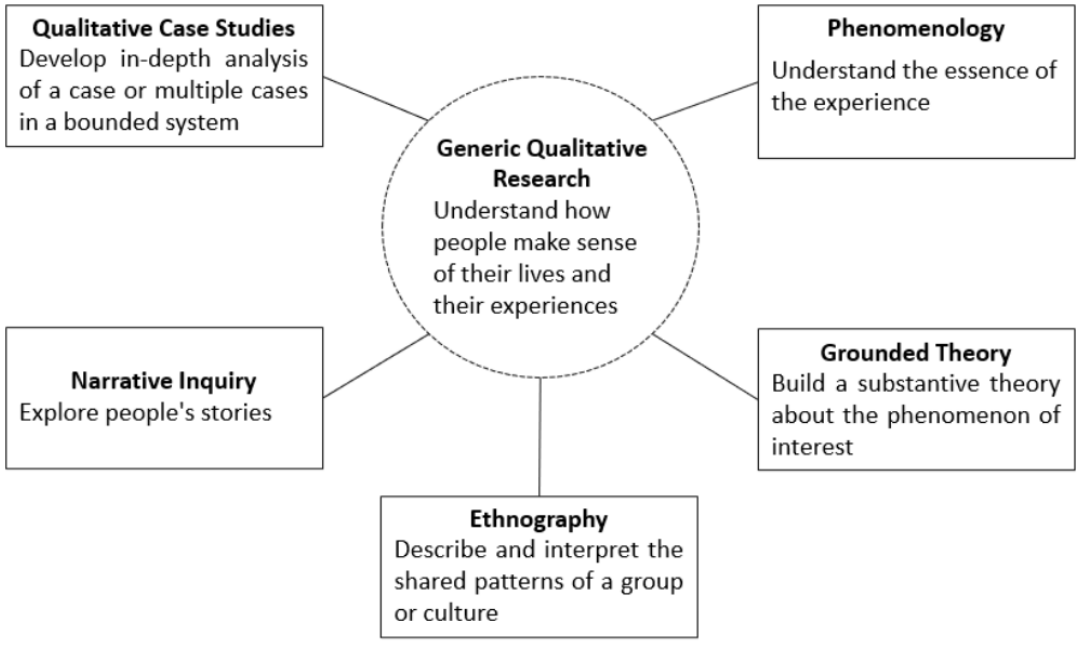
	Quantitative	**Qualitative**
Principle orientation to the role of theory in relation to research	Deductive; testing of theory	Inductive; generation of theory
Epistemological orientation	Natural science model, in particular positivism	Interpretivism
Ontological orientation	Objectivism	Constructionism

Note. Adapted from Bell et al. (2022)

There were different methods used in a qualitative study. The most common methods in management studies included narrative research, grounded theory, ethnography, case studies, and phenomenology, summarised in Figure 4.1 (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Jahja et al., 2021). Given that this study aimed to explore, interpret, and develop theories about the nature and development of *qiling* in the Chinese context, which is grounded in data, grounded theory was considered as the most effective method for addressing the research questions. The justification of grounded theory will be discussed in the following section.

Figure 4.1

Types of Qualitative Research



Note. Adapted from Merriam and Tisdell (2016)

4.3.2 Grounded theory

The first reason for adopting grounded theory was because this study aims to build a substantive theory about the nature and development of *qiling* in a Chinese context. The fundamental objective of grounded theory research was to formulate a theory through a methodical and organised procedure that entailed the simultaneous collection, analysis, and coding of data concerning the fundamental social processes linked to the phenomenon under investigation (Glaser, 1998). In contrast, narrative research placed emphasis on the personal narratives shared by participants, while phenomenology centres on uncovering shared experiences among individuals. Nonetheless, grounded theory research surpassed mere description to attain a deeper comprehension of the significance and behaviours intertwined with the context, circumstances, and repercussions associated with the phenomenon of interest (Corbin, 2021). In addition, grounded theory was appropriate at identifying the situated nature of a phenomenon and determining how it happens (Hays & McKibben, 2021; Milliken, 2010). This fitted the need for context-specific research questions – exploring the nature and development of *qiling* in a particular Chinese context. This was supported by similar studies using the grounded theory to understand workplace bullying in different contexts. For example, Kwan et al. (2014) developed a definition of workplace bullying in a Malaysian context, and Rai and Agarwal (2017) explored the process of bullying in the Indian context.

Second, adopting a grounded theory approach was appropriate when little is known about a topic due to grounded theory's exploratory and inductive style of enquiry (Birks & Mills, 2015). According to a literature review on workplace *qiling*, there was no research-based definition and theoretical framework developed from the Chinese context to explain the nature and development of *qiling*. This demonstrated the lack of knowledge about *qiling* in China and the need to develop an explanatory theory to explain this phenomenon.

Other reasons for adopting grounded theory included its flexibility and use of concurrent data generation and data analysis (Groen et al., 2018; McCall & Edwards, 2021). This allowed the researcher to shift and capture the fluidity of a topic as things change and move on throughout the study period (Charmaz, 2014). For example, different from other qualitative methods, grounded theory provided a series of guidance and analytical tools for data collection and analysis, such as theoretical sensitivity, theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation, constant

comparison method, and memoing, which were discussed in the following sections in this chapter. An adaptable research approach was relevant because bullying is dynamic from being responsive to ongoing changes in cultural values and social-economic influences (Einarsen et al., 2011; Einarsen et al., 2020). This also prompted academic researchers investigating the concept of workplace bullying to adopt a grounded theory approach (Agarwal & Rai, 2019; Kang & Yun, 2016; O'Donnell & MacIntosh, 2016). Therefore, based on the above reasons, a grounded theory approach was justified as the most effective method to address the research questions. More specifically, constructivist grounded theory, which was one of the main versions of grounded theory, was adopted in this study.

4.3.3 Constructivist grounded theory

While existing literature illustrated various versions of grounded theory, three main versions, including (1) Glaser's classical grounded theory, (2) Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory, and (3) Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory, were widely recognised and used in the domain of social sciences (Corbin et al., 2015). These three versions are partly similar in technical vocabulary (such as coding, memo writing, theoretical sampling, and data saturation), and process as they all use constant comparison as a tool to (1) gain theoretical sensitivity, (2) facilitate theoretical sampling, (3) refine the categories and raise them to increasingly higher level of abstraction, and (4) link abstraction back to source data (Singh & Estefan, 2018). However, these three versions had important differences in the perspectives of philosophy and methodology. These similarities and differences between these versions led to confusion and uncertainty in how to best conceptualise and design a grounded theory study; therefore, researchers might have difficulty understanding how to choose the most appropriate version for their specific research situation (Charmaz, 2014). Considering the philosophical and methodological similarities and differences between these three versions, constructivist grounded theory was selected for this study.

4.3.3.1 Philosophical considerations

The three versions of grounded theory are developed by different philosophical underpinnings. Glaser's classical grounded theory, as the earliest version, holds both positivist and objectivist positions. In order to discover a grounded theory, Glaser considered researchers as distant observers. In other words, researchers play a neutral role in a study and should let data speak for itself rather than select data. Glaser rejected other versions of grounded theory, such as

Strauss and Corbin's and Charmaz's versions, as they forced a bias on the emerging theory (Glaser & Holton, 2004). Unlike Glaser's philosophical position, Corbin and Straus (2007) shifted to a more post-positivist position. Based on this position, they developed the second version of grounded theory acknowledging the possibility of multiple viewpoints and maintaining an objectivist perspective on a knowable and external reality. In other words, Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory recognise researchers' influences and values; however, researchers can control their influences and values by utilising procedures to maximise objectivity.

In contrast to Glaser's and Strauss and Corbin's versions of grounded theory, Charmaz's (2014) version represents a notable departure from objectivism. Charmaz championed a constructivist viewpoint that acknowledges researchers' active involvement in collaboratively constructing knowledge alongside research participants. Further setting herself apart from the other two versions of grounded theory, Charmaz advocated for researchers to be fully immersed rather than maintaining a distant stance during the process of analysing and interpreting data (Charmaz, 2014). Unlike Glaser's opinion, Charmaz (2014) believed that within the intricacies of a profoundly complex social world, there always exists the potential for multiple, and even conflicting, perspectives on phenomena.

While both Charmaz's and Strauss and Corbin's versions of grounded theory acknowledge the potential for multiple interpretations of reality, Charmaz (2014) diverges from the versions of Strauss and Corbin as well as Glaser when it comes to acquiring knowledge about reality. Charmaz perceives research as a collaborative endeavour involving both researchers and participants. Consequently, Charmaz's (2014) version of grounded theory encourages researchers to actively engage with diverse interpretations of the phenomenon being studied. Charmaz (2014) also promotes the evaluation of how participants comprehend both their own interpretations and those put forth by the researcher. In addition, Charmaz (2014) holds the belief that reality is fluid and that individuals shape localised meanings about reality to comprehend and navigate it within their immediate surroundings. As a result, she places a strong emphasis on attaining knowledge that is contextual and specific to particular settings. Charmaz's version of grounded theory considers the researcher's previous personal and professional experiences, as well as existing knowledge such as literature reviews. Unlike Glaser's version of grounded theory, which might suspend existing knowledge, Charmaz's version of grounded theory allows these experiences and knowledge to be utilised in order to

challenge established viewpoints or facilitate a fresh understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Constructivist grounded theory is also a direct methodological descendent of the pragmatist tradition. Charmaz (2017) has depicted and compared key assumptions and features between pragmatism and constructivist grounded theory as shown in Table 4.2. Given the philosophical consideration of the above three versions, Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory is more appropriate for this research than the other two versions. Compared to Glaser's and Strauss and Corbin's versions, Charmaz's constructivist philosophical underpinning is relatively more in line with the researcher's philosophical position (i.e., pragmatism).

Table 4.2

Comparison of Pragmatism and Constructivist Grounded Theory

Pragmatism	Constructivist Grounded Theory
• Views reality as social	• Views reality as social
• Locates experience in its social context	• Locates experience in its social context
• Assumes process	• **Studies** processes
• Presupposes a fluid, somewhat indeterminate reality	• Presupposes a fluid, somewhat indeterminate reality
• Views human beings as agentic actors	• Views human beings as agentic actors
• Acknowledges multiple perspectives	• **Seeks multiple perspectives**
• Emphasises the significance of language	• **Pays analytic attention to language**
• Sees meanings and actions as emergent and as affecting each other	• **Studies** emergent meanings and actions and how each affects the other
• Provides the roots of a theory of action	• Provides **methods for theorizing action**
• Studies people's actions to solve emergent problems	• Studies people's actions to solve emergent problems
• Takes temporality into account	• **Offers tools** to study temporality
• Joins facts and values	• Joins facts and values
• Unites the viewer with the viewed	• **Bonds the researcher with the researched**
• Unifies mind and body	• Sees research as an embodied process
• Treats truth as conditional	• Views truth as conditional
• Advocates social reform	

	• **Provides a method for critical inquiry**

Note. Adapted from Charmaz (2008)

4.3.3.2 Theoretical considerations

Theoretical considerations are inherently shaped by researchers' philosophical stances (Crotty, 1998). In grounded theory, the theoretical perspectives of theorists influence their approaches to collecting and analysing field data. Although the three grounded theory approaches exhibit differing philosophical foundations, they share commonalities that stem from the methodology's shared origins. However, the practical aspects reveal more pronounced similarities in comparison to the philosophical underpinnings of these three approaches (Corbin & Straus, 2007). First, all researchers of grounded theory rely on data, often in the form of interview data, directly obtained from participants. Second, all three approaches predominantly employ induction as an analytical tool for theoretical sampling. In simpler terms, the selection of participants and events is guided by the evolving trajectory of the emerging theory. Third, in these three versions of grounded theory, data collection and analysis are performed simultaneously. However, these versions also have theoretical differences.

Charmaz (2014) also advocates that the close connection between researchers and participants and the iterative processes of data collection and analysis play a crucial role in conducting a constructive grounded theory study. Constructivist grounded theory encourages researchers to involve in a creative process of theory co-construction and to utilise an analytic tool called abduction (Charmaz, 2014). Abduction refers to the involvement of intuitive and creative ideas that can explain observations that cannot be directly answered by the data (Bruscaglioni, 2016). In other words, with Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory, abductive reasoning can enrich theory construction by enhancing the re-examination of data or prompting the collection of more data in order to explain observations that are unanswered or unexpected (Charmaz, 2014).

On the contrary, Strauss and Corbin (1998) held a perspective that deemed the interplay between researchers and participants as inherently biased, and they categorised interpretation as "speculation" (p. 12). They asserted that a theory cultivated from data is more apt to mirror "reality" than a theory constructed by amalgamating a series of concepts grounded in personal experience or solely through speculative methods (Straus & Corbin, 1990, p. 12). In opposition, Charmaz contended that the scope of grounded theory remains restricted if researchers solely focus on objective data, neglecting the researcher's own expertise and experiences (Charmaz,

2014). In essence, Charmaz (2014) argued that personal experience and expertise can serve as a foundation for formulating pertinent questions. They enhance the theoretical sensitivity of researchers, which is the ability to define phenomena and potential relationships in an abstract form (Charmaz, 2014). Therefore, compared to the Glaser's and Strauss and Corbin's versions of grounded theory, adopting the Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory was not only consistent with the researcher's philosophical position (i.e., pragmatism) but also enabled him to use full interpretive potential to explore the data grounded in the field and co-construct the nature and development of *qiling* with participants.

4.4 Participant selection criteria

Participants in this study consisted of Chinese employees who experienced *qiling* in the workplace. Specifically, there were two selection criteria developed for the participant selection in order to obtain rich data.

First, participants in this study were Chinese employees currently working in Shenzhen, China for more than one year. According to the literature review on workplace bullying, employees in the Chinese workplace are more likely to become a target of bullying than managers due to the cultural factor of high power distance (Zhang & Song, 2019). The researcher also considered exploring the nature and development of *qiling* from the perspective of other groups, including managers and HR practitioners. After careful consideration, these groups were not considered as the first choice for this study as they are not usually the direct victim of workplace bullying, compared to employees. However, the opinions of managers and HR practitioners on the nature and development of *qiling* were also worthwhile to explore in future study (Busby et al., 2022; Cowan, 2012), as they could provide further insights into the nature and development of *qiling* that emerged from employees' experiences.

In addition, this qualitative grounded theory study was to obtain an in-depth understanding of *qiling* in a Chinese context rather than quantitative studies focusing on a high level of generalisability of the findings. Hence, the researcher was not able to interview participants from every region of China. However, to obtain rich data, participants were recruited in Shenzhen as it is a representative city of demographic diversity in China. For example, not only do around 70 per cent of the population come from various regions in China but also the city has the largest ethnic minority population (Shenzhen Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Hence, the

selection of the city was relatively more convenient to access participants with various demographic factors than other regions in China.

Second, the participants believed they either directly or indirectly experienced *qiling* at work in Shenzhen within the last two years. To be specific, the participants in this study included targets and bystanders of *qiling*. This criterion ensured that participants were able to provide more specific details about their *qiling* experiences. However, those who experienced *qiling* more than two years ago were not considered in this research. This could reduce recall bias as they might not reflect their *qiling* experiences from a long time ago in an accurate and clear way (Porta, 2014). In addition, informed by the constructivist grounded theory approach, the researcher was not allowed to impose preconceived definitions on the data. Instead, it allowed the data to shape and refine the concepts that emerge (Charmaz, 2014). With this in mind, no academic definitions and behaviour examples of workplace bullying developed in dominant bullying literature were provided in the participant recruitment process. This allowed the participants to provide their own understanding of *qiling* at work. However, these concepts were used as sensitising concepts in the data analysis process to further develop and organise the findings grounded from the experiences of the participants (Charmaz, 2014).

4.5 Sampling methods

To capture appropriate participants for this grounded theory study, in line with studies using Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory approach (Lee et al., 2019; Ngalellongo, 2015), purposive, snowball and theoretical sampling methods were used in this study.

4.5.1 Initial sampling

The participant recruitment began with purposive sampling to identify participants who met the selection criteria. Purposive sampling referred to an intentional selection of informants based on their ability to elucidate a specific theme, concept, or phenomenon (Michalos, 2014). To recruit participants who met the participant criteria and agreed to share their *qiling* experiences, the researcher posted the Chinese version of the recruitment advertisement (Appendix H) on two major Chinese social media platforms, Weibo and WeChat. The advertisement included empirical studies tend to draw from the opportunity of social media and websites to recruit study participants with increased support in the literature endorsing this type of online recruitment advertising (Ali et al., 2020; Frandsen et al., 2016; Whitaker et al., 2017). In the same vein, the recruitment strategy used in this study was also similar to Liu et

al. (2018) who posted recruitment advertisements on Chinese social media, including Weibo and WeChat, to recruit Chinese participants for an empirical study. In addition, apart from posting the recruitment advertisement, the researcher also attempted to search the term *qiling* on Weibo and contact those who posted their *qiling* experiences on Weibo for participation in this study. Two participants who met the participant criteria initially contacted the researcher to express their interest in this study. After confirming that these two participants read the information sheet (Appendix D) and agreed to participate in this study, they were asked to ensure a convenient time for an interview. An interview with each of them was conducted at an agreed time. Following this, the selection of the subsequent participants was guided by the theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014), which was discussed in the next section.

The snowball sampling method was also used in this study to address the limitations of recruiting participants through Chinese social media platforms. Arigo et al. (2018) recognised the lack of established guidance on recruitment through social media platforms and recommended researchers reflect carefully on how they use online advertising. There are two main limitations the researcher faced in the participant recruitment on social media platforms. First, those who were not active users of Weibo might not see the recruitment advertisement. Second, given that *qiling* might be a sensitive topic to some potential participants in China, they were less likely to share their experiences with the researcher whom they were not familiar with. Due to these limitations, the researcher also adopted the snowball sampling method in order to obtain a sufficient sample size.

Snowballing involved asking participants to recommend individuals from their social network who met the participant criteria. Snowballing was an effective way to obtain rich and valid data from interviewees, particularly in China (Liu et al., 2020). Using *guanxi* was a common way of snowball sampling to get access to potential interviewees and gain their initial trust in China (Lawrence, 2022). The term *guanxi* was considered as a series of social interactions that form an intimate and reciprocal relationship to exchange information and enmesh individuals within networks of reciprocal obligation (Bian, 2002). Given that the study focused on a sensitive topic – *qiling*, gaining the trust of interviewees was crucial to collecting rich information as Chinese interviewees might be not willing to share sensitive and detailed experiences with a person they did not trust (Zhou & Nunes, 2016). For this study, at the end of the interview (see Appendix I), the researcher asked the participants to recommend one or two individuals who met the participant criteria and could provide insights into the interview questions. In addition,

the researcher also asked people in his social network to recommend potential participants or forward the recruitment advertisement to other people who might be interested in this study.

4.5.2 Theoretical sampling

After purposively sampling the initial participants, theoretical sampling provided a further direction for the recruitment of subsequent participants. Theoretical sampling was one of the key components of constructivist grounded theory studies. As Corbin et al. (2015) defined, theoretical sampling refers to "a method of data collection based on concepts derived from data. The purpose of theoretical sampling was to collect data from places, people, and events that will maximise opportunities to develop concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions, uncover variations, and identify relationships between concepts" (p. 194). This definition provided a conceptual understanding of theoretical sampling and demonstrates its crucial role in the research process of a grounded theory study. However, the lack of clear understanding and exemplars of theoretical sampling might cause confusion among researchers adopting a grounded theory approach, particularly novice researchers (Butler et al., 2018). Theoretical sampling could be used in different ways in grounded theory studies. This study adopted two common usages of theoretical sampling, such as seeking new participants with a diversity of attributes and determining additional interview questions (Butler et al., 2018; Ligita et al., 2020).

Theoretical sampling provided a further direction for selecting subsequent participants for this study. Seeking new participants with a diversity of attributes was a common usage of theoretical sampling (McCrae & Purssell, 2016). it can mean recruiting new participants with a demographic attribute that was different from the initial participants (Ligita et al., 2020). However, there was no requirement to sample for population generalisability which was pursued by quantitative studies (Bell et al., 2022) as the purpose of theoretical sampling is to seek pertinent data to develop an emerging theory (Charmaz, 2014). As Charmaz (2014) stated, the initial sampling in a constructivist grounded theory study was seen as a starting point, and theoretical sampling guided where the researcher went.

In this study, the researcher initially recruited two participants who met the participant criteria, and the researcher asked them to describe what attributes people had that were more likely to experience *qiling* or become a target. According to an initial analysis of their experiences, a couple of attributes, including junior and female employees, were identified as a direction for

the subsequent participant recruitment. This guided the researcher to select subsequent participants with a particular attribute as these participants with particular attributes might have more insights about the nature and development of *qiling* at work than other participants. This process of theoretical sampling was conducted throughout the data collection and analysis and stopped until reaching the point of theoretical saturation, which will be discussed in section 4.10.

It was noted that the researcher was not able to recruit participants with every attribute mentioned by the participants. The main reason was that the researcher was physically based in New Zealand during the data collection period and could not come back to Shenzhen for data collection due to the travel restrictions of COVID-19 in both China and New Zealand. To some extent, this might constrain the ability to achieve the initial objective of theoretical sampling. Recruiting people into a research sample would be particularly difficult for novice researchers, doctoral students and studies with restricted time or funding (Joseph et al., 2016). With grounded theory research, Timonen et al. (2018) recognised that theoretical sampling becomes limited if the specific type of desired data is too cumbersome to access or is unavailable within a feasible timeframe for the study. When facing this limitation, the researcher considered guidance on theoretical sampling from the relevant methodological literature (Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg, 2012). It was acceptable as the researcher needed to be pragmatic and practical in accepting barriers and limitations outside of the researcher's control. However, the researcher attempted to recruit those with the most frequent attributes mentioned by the participants (see Table 4.3), and these attributes provided a further direction for the participant recruitment within the participant criteria to develop the theories about the nature and development of *qiling* in the Chinese context. Employees with other attributes, for example, minority, were not included in this study because no individuals with these attributes volunteered and theoretical sampling did not demonstrate that they would be required.

Table 4.3

Attributes of Individuals Experiencing Qiling

Attribute	Participant with the attribute
Junior employee	P02, P03, P04, P05, P07, P08, P10, P14, P26, P31, P32

Female employee	P02, P05, P06, P08, P09, P12, P13, P14, P17, P19, P20, P21, P23, P30, P31, P32
Pregnant female	P12, P20, P30
Employee working in a Stated owned company	P01, P02, P03, P07, P12, P14, P16, P18, P20, P29, P32
Employee working in a private company	P04, P05, P06, P08, P09, P10, P11, P13, P15, P17, P19, P21, P22, P23, P24, P25, P26, P27, P28, P30. P31
Sandwich generation (上有老下有小) employee	P04, P20, P25, P28, P29, P30

4.6 Reflection on challenges of data collection

Given that this study aimed to explore Chinese employees' experiences on a sensitive topic (i.e., *qiling*) by conducting online interviews, the researcher faced two main challenges during the data collection, such as obtaining (1) access to participants and (2) trust of participants. The following two sections will discuss these challenges and how the researcher overcame them.

4.6.1 Obtaining access to participants

The first challenge the researcher faced during the data collection was obtaining access to participants. Specifically, it included the recruitment of suitable participants informed by theoretical sampling and the arrangement for interviews. As the global pandemic of COVID-19 restricted international travel during the data collection period, the researcher was not able to visit Shenzhen, China from New Zealand to collect data. Therefore, this limited the access to potential participants as the researcher could not recruit participants by a convenience sampling method (Bell et al., 2022), for example, in-person recruitment at various locations in Shenzhen. Instead, the researcher posted the recruitment advertisement on social media platforms and adopted snowballing sampling method to recruit suitable participants. It was noted that the use of *guanxi* played a crucial role in obtaining access to participants in this study. *Guanxi* can be understood through the English term 'gatekeepers' who allow access to participants (Lawrence, 2022). As Zhou and Nunes (2016) state, *guanxi* was one of the most crucial factors in obtaining access to potential participants in China as they may not be willing to accept an interview from a stranger. Furthermore, it is proposed that without guanxi, a person could not simply complete anything done in China (Davies et al., 2003). In this study, the

majority of the participants (n=28) were found through the social network of the researcher and the participants who already participated in the interview.

Another challenge in obtaining access to participants was the arrangement of time and location for interviews. Given the cultural influence of high-power distance and organisational policies, most of the participants were not able to join the interview during working time, without the permission of a line or senior manager. In order to encourage the potential participants to involve in this study and enable the participants to feel flexible for an interview, conducting online interviews was particularly appropriate in this study. To make sure that the participants felt comfortable during the interview and avoided the conflict of work arrangements, the researcher asked them to choose a convenient time and a safe location for an online interview. Most of the participants preferred to join the interview at home after working hours. However, this led to inconvenience for the researcher as New Zealand's time is four or five hours ahead of the domestic time in China. Therefore, the researcher informed the participants about the time difference between New Zealand and China and discussed a suitable time for an interview with them. Around half of the participants agreed to join the interview over the weekend. For those who were only available in the evening during the weekdays, most of them agreed to join the interview as soon as possible after they arrived home from work in order to accommodate the researcher's schedule.

Conducting online interviews not only met the need of the time and location for participants but also was more appropriate for investigating a sensitive topic (e.g., bullying) than face-to-face interviews. Online interviews can offer another layer of anonymity not available during in-person interviews (Bell et al., 2022). As the interview for this study covered a series of questions about *qiling* experiences, employees might not proactively provide detailed and valid information under the perceived pressure of their managers. It was because employees would be afraid of the power of managers if they shared negative experiences related to their managers. Therefore, the researcher did not contact the participants' managers for permission. Instead, the researcher directly contacted participants for an online interview if they voluntarily agreed to participate.

4.6.2 Obtaining the trust of participants

Obtaining the trust of participants was another challenge the researcher faced in order to collect deeper and richer data. In this study, two ways, including a detailed introduction and *guanxi*,

were used to obtain the trust of participants. Firstly, before starting a formal interview, the researcher made informal contact with participants to provide: (1) a self-introduction of the researcher, (2) a brief introduction of this research, (3) an explanation of why the researcher was interested in the topic, and (4) an explanation of the informed consent form, including participant rights. This informal conversation enabled the researcher to establish an initial foundation of trust with participants and address their concerns related to the interview, such as privacy protection, anonymity, and the use of data. Secondly, the use of *guanxi* was an effective way to obtain the trust of participants. The main reason was that participants might feel apprehension, caution, and reluctance when interviewed by an unknown person (Nguyen, 2015). This might result in the failure to collect detailed and insightful information from participants. In this study, the majority of the participants were recruited from the social network of the researcher and the interviewed participants. This enabled the researcher to further build trust with the participants from a positive footing. For example, one of the participants explained why she accepted the interview: "*I really trusted you and could tell you anything I know because you were recommended by …*" (P20). By overcoming the above two challenges, the researcher obtained rich data from the participants as all of the participants shared their experiences in detail, which was also consistent with the requirement of constructivist grounded theory on data collection (i.e., capturing detailed experiences from participants) (Charmaz, 2014).

4.7 Summary of the sample

A total of 32 participants participated in this research (see Appendix J). All of them met the criteria of this research in that they were Chinese employees: (1) currently working in Shenzhen for more than one year, and (2) believed they had directly or indirectly experienced *qiling* in Shenzhen's workplace within the last tw o years. All of the participants had their own understanding of *qiling* at work. Of the 32 participants, as shown in Table 4.4, around 60 percent (n=18) self-identified as victims of bullying. In addition, approximately 90 percent of the participants (n=29, 90.6%), including 15 victims (46.9%), reported that they had witnessed bullying at work. The participants worked in either a state-owned (n=11) or private company (n=22) in various industries. The mean duration of their total working experiences was around 5 years (SD=5.427; n=12, less than 3 years; n=16, more than 5 years). The mean age of the participants was approximately 30 years old (SD=5.708). This indicated that the sample of this research was relatively young. The overview of the participants for this study was summarised in Appendix K.

Table 4.4

Number of Victims and Bystanders (n=32)

Participants	Number	Percentage
Victims	18	56.3%
Bystanders	29	90.6%
Victims and bystanders	15	46.9%

4.8 The interview process

This study collected narrative accounts of *qiling* experiences by interviewing the targeted participants. This section elaborates on the conduct of pilot interviews and the process of the actual interviews.

4.8.1 Pilot interview

In order to test whether the initial interview questions were clear and appropriate to the participants, the researcher conducted pilot interviews with two participants who met the participant criteria. Each of the interviews was conducted for 50-60 minutes. The pilot interviews were conducted via the online meeting software Tencent Meeting. As discussed before, the trust between interviewers and interviewees plays a crucial role in interviewing a sensitive topic, such as workplace bullying. Given that one of the participants mentioned the confidentiality of the interview data at the beginning, the researcher explained the confidentiality and participant rights of this research. After that, the participant felt safer starting the interview. During the interviews, both participants said that the interview questions were understandable and not difficult to answer. Probing questions were useful for obtaining more detailed and new data from the participants (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Therefore, using the initial interview guide seemed to be appropriate. However, as part of the theoretical sampling strategy outlined early, the interview guide was consistently developed as the data collection continued (Charmaz, 2014). Box 1 provides an example of memoing about the development of interview questions.

Box 1

Memo: Developing Interview Questions

Analytical memo: Initial direction of *the nature of qiling in the Chinese context*

While I just finished two pilot interviews, there were some initial thoughts in relation to the two research questions – exploring the nature and development of *qiling* from a Chinese employees' perspective. Firstly, although the nature of *qiling* in China is similar to bullying in the West, including repeated and negative behaviour, and power imbalance, *qiling* is more likely to be intended and hidden. Both of the participants described *qiling* as a type of "hidden rule" in the Chinese workplace. For example, some managers may smile to demonstrate friendliness to their employees as people in China pay more attention to *mianzi* (face) and group harmony; however, they deliberately make troubles to employees behind their back. Therefore, subsequent interview questions could also focus on this.

The pilot interviews also provided initial ideas for theoretical sampling. For example, firstly, during the interviews, both participants mentioned that employees in private enterprises, particularly in small and micro enterprises, may be more likely to suffer from *qiling* as these types of enterprises may lack a comprehensive management system compared to state-owned enterprises. Secondly, one of the participants said that female employees, particularly those who are pregnant, are more likely to be targets of *qiling*. Thirdly, both participants said that, as Chinese organisations might have job and age discrimination issues, employees in China who received low pay or worked in a lower position, particularly those junior employees, may be bullied by their managers or older colleagues. Therefore, given the consideration of theoretical sampling, these types of employees were considered as the subsequent participants for this research, and selecting subsequent participants was also guided by the emergent categories from the initial data analysis.

4.8.2 Research interview

This study used a semi-structured interview to collect data, and the interview was conducted in Mandarin Chinese. The period of the interview ranged from 50 to 120 minutes. An interview was a relatively common way to collect data in qualitative research employing a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). Adopting a semi-structured interview ensured that the researcher not only had a series of questions in the same form as an interview guide but also could change the order of the questions (Bell et al., 2022). In addition, compared to structured interviews, semi-structured interviews were relatively more flexible as the researcher had a certain degree of freedom and could ask further questions based on responses considered important (Corbin et al., 2015).

Similar to other studies exploring experiences of workplace bullying (Ciby & Raya, 2015; Kwan et al., 2014; Salin et al., 2019), the researcher prepared broad interview questions about the nature and development of *qiling* in advance. Additionally, the supplementary questions were constructed in accordance with the participants' responses. The initial interview questions furnished a broad overview of the research context and furnished concepts and preliminary categories to delve into. Subsequent interviews, directed by theoretical sampling, diverged from general insights and concentrated on investigating both evolving categories and discrepancies within the theory (Charmaz, 2014).

The interview questions were carefully crafted and developed around the semi-structured schedule which addressed two research questions of this study. Cohering with theoretical sampling, the interview schedule was changed and developed as the data collection and analysis continued. Determining additional interview questions was a common usage of theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014). This indicated that researchers were able to develop potential interview questions that were not previously included in the initial interview guide (Ligita et al., 2020). This aided grounded theory researchers in readjusting or redirecting their interview questions to gather insights into emerging concepts or to assess the evolving theory (Draucker et al., 2007). Consequently, the utilisation of theoretical sampling might entail introducing fresh interview questions or probes to acquire a more comprehensive understanding of the categories and the interconnections among them (Butler et al., 2018). Before asking questions related to the research topic, the demographic information of the participants, for example, age, work experience, and educational background, were asked. In order to further explore the participants' *qiling* experiences, a probing technique was adopted in the interview process, and the interview questions were revised accordingly. This was in line with theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014), because constructivist grounded theory emphasises the participants' subjective perspectives as well as their articulated actions.

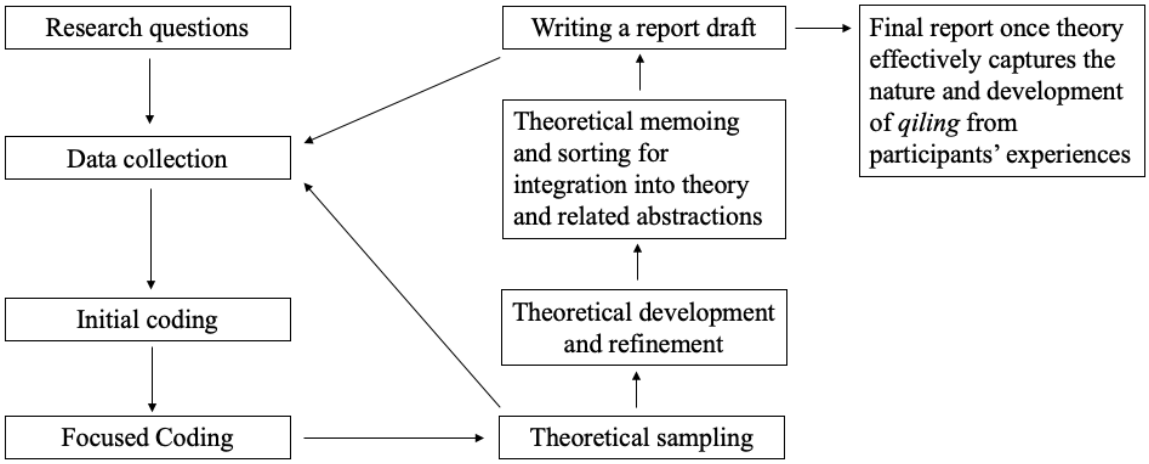
4.9 Data analysis

Once each interview was completed, the researcher transcribed the interview data verbatim using an electronic transcribing tool. After transcribing the interview, coding was a key process in grounded theory and required reviewing the transcripts and assigning labels to components that are potentially theoretically significant. The coding of constructivist grounded theory is divided into three stages: (1) initial coding, (2) focused coding, and (3) theoretical coding. The

coding process was conducted with the assistance of a qualitative analysis software NVivo 12. In general, the data collection and analysis of constructivist grounded theory is explained in Figure 4.2 (Charmaz, 2006). After analysing data in Chinese, the result was translated back into English for the Findings and Discussion chapters.

Figure 4.2

Diagrammatic Explanation of Constructivist Grounded Theory



Note. Adapted from Charmaz (2006)

4.9.1 Transcribing

Given that the language of the interview data was Mandarin, a transcribing tool iFLYTEX was selected for the data transcribing. It was because this tool was widely used in academic studies and mainstream social media for the purpose of transcribing voice data to texts, specifically for the Mandarin language (Huang et al., 2022; Song, 2021). The audio data of each interview was immediately transcribed into a transcript after the interview was completed. Subsequently, the researcher cross-checked the transcript against the interview recording and made necessary corrections to ensure the accuracy of the transcript for data analysis.

4.9.2 Initial coding

After transcribing each interview, the researcher conducted initial coding immediately. Initial coding is the first step of data analysis in this constructivist grounded theory study, and it involves the preliminary breaking down of the raw data. Charmaz (2014) referred to initial coding as action coding as its focus was on identifying the processes that people were engaging in. As a symbol for an abstract comprehension of the data, codes were created. Moreover,

coding allowed the raw interview data to be systematically organised and condensed into manageable quantities of analysed data. During the initial coding phase, the researcher remained open-minded and was willing to investigate whatever ideas and possibilities emerged from the data in an effort to avoid forcing the data to conform to preconceived notions and personal biases. As a result of a review of bullying-related literature and previous experiences as an employee previously working in Shenzhen, the researcher was already familiar with various concepts pertaining to the nature and development of *qiling*. Nonetheless, the researcher used memoing throughout the data analysis to moderate these preconceived notions.

In the initial coding phase, the researcher employed a line-by-line coding approach, following Charmaz's (2014) recommendation. This approach facilitated the identification of subtle nuances and enabled the researcher to immerse fully in grasping the initial essence of how participants constructed their understanding of the nature and evolution of *qiling*. Drawing from the principles of constructivist grounded theory (Carmichael & Cunningham, 2017; Charmaz, 2014), codes were articulated using gerunds, which are verb forms ending in '-ing' and function as nouns within sentences (e.g., being asked to work for a senior colleague). This approach allowed the researcher to outline ongoing actions within blocks of text or descriptions of incidents, uncover implicit processes, and maintain an active and continually evolving analytical process (Charmaz, 2008). Table 4.5 demonstrates an example for the initial data analysis employing the line-by-line coding approach in this study. Recognising that constructivist grounded theory underscores language's role in theory construction, certain codes took on in-vivo characteristics, employing participants' original Chinese expressions (e.g., *chuanxiaoxie*, *guanxi*, and *shuaiguo*), rather than translating them directly into English. This intentional choice aimed to preserve the participant's original intention and perspective (Charmaz, 2014).

Table 4.5

Line by Line Coding Example

Transcribed interview data	Line by line coding
"*I will provide two examples [of bullying], one related to the manager and the other related to my colleagues when I first started working as a bank teller. In the first year of employment, the bank*	Being bullied by managers Being bullied by senior colleagues Experiencing bullying as a newcomer Experiencing bullying in a bank

often placed great importance on seniority, particularly with respect to senior employees. As a newcomer, I was required to serve all the senior staff, which included tasks such as serving tea and water at meetings, cleaning up after meetings, and being asked by all the senior employees to clean their offices earlier than others every morning. While working at the counter, I often experienced old employees stopping their work." (P001)	Ranking seniority Respecting senior colleagues Being asked to serving senior colleagues Being asked to do something unrelated to the job scope Being asked to arrive early Being asked to work for senior colleagues

Note. The original transcript and codes were written in Mandarin Chinese and translated into English as an example of initial coding.

In the initial coding stage, the researcher identified a number of codes to inform early pattens, and then the codes were constantly compared with each other. This constant comparison process facilitated the researcher in discerning which codes emerged as the most salient reflections of the participants' viewpoints. Moreover, it guaranteed that the initial assumptions formulated during the preliminary analysis phase could be scrutinised and modified, thereby fostering fresh insights into participants' narratives (Charmaz, 2014).

4.9.3 Focused coding

Following the identification of initial codes that were both frequent and of significant importance, the researcher proceeded with focused coding in order to systematise and refine the analysis, thereby synthesizing and elucidating a substantial volume of data (Charmaz, 2021). As proposed by Charmaz (2014), the transition to focused coding occurred organically as the researcher began to "synthesise, analyse, and conceptualise larger segments of data" subsequent to the initial coding phase (p. 138). The researcher meticulously examined the focused codes to ascertain which ones most accurately captured the empirical phenomenon, thereby forming preliminary theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2014).

Each transcript was meticulously reviewed and revisited, with a critical assessment against the initial categories identified during the initial coding stage. The practice of continual data comparison, involving juxtaposing data against pre-established categories and subsequently contrasting categories with new ones, was integral to ensuring the analytical robustness of these categories. When selecting which codes to elevate to the status of theoretical categories, the

researcher sought those codes that bore the weight of the analysis. The focused codes were then subjected to further testing against the data by employing them to scrutinise substantial portions of the data (Charmaz, 2014). This method proved invaluable in conceptualising various perspectives held by employees in Shenzhen while simultaneously upholding shared meaning within the studied phenomenon (i.e., *qiling*). Additionally, the concurrent practice of writing memos allowed the researcher to consolidate, synthesise categories, elaborate on analyses, and cultivate emergent insights.

The literature on workplace bullying was additionally reviewed to enhance the researcher's theoretical sensitivity to concepts that might not have been apparent during the initial coding stage. Therefore, existing bullying literature aided the analysis by providing language to explain the concepts that emerged from the data rather than forcing ideas onto the data. Subsequently, the researcher proceeded to analyse the data, employing theoretical sampling drawn from the literature in accordance with the evolving theoretical sensitivity. At this stage, the coding process became more refined and focused. Sets of analogous codes were re-evaluated using higher levels of abstraction, drawing from prevailing bullying concepts and theories established in European countries. Focused coding continued until all the theoretical categories were identified (Charmaz, 2006).

4.9.4 Theoretical coding

At the theoretical coding stage, the researcher synthesised empirical evidence from focused coding with relevant concepts and theories to provide a coherent analytical story of employees' perspectives on the nature and development of *qiling* in Shenzhen's workplace. Theoretical coding involves a more conceptual approach to data analysis in the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). This stage helped the researcher specify possible relationships between categories developed from focused coding. Theoretical coding used theoretical sensitivity, which referred to "the ability to recognise and extract from the data elements that have relevance for an emerging theory" (Birks & Mills, 2015, p. 59). In this coding phase, theoretical coding took place concurrently with focused coding, following an iterative approach (Glaser, 1978, 1998). The researcher delved into the interconnections among focused codes and the potential integration of these codes into a grounded theory framework. In the process of theoretical coding, the researcher scrutinised relationships among categories and amalgamated categories to construct an analytical framework for the data (Charmaz, 2014). This comprehensive data analysis procedure encompassed theoretical contemplations,

assumptions, and notes, all meticulously documented through the practice of memo writing. At this coding stage, categories were combined, and relationships between categories were analysed and to construct an analytical framework of the data (Charmaz, 2014).

At the theoretical coding stage, the researcher combined the research findings with the bullying concepts and theories, which have been discussed in Chapter 2, in order to construct an explanation of the nature and development of *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen. This encompassed an abductive and iterative process that oscillated between inductive and deductive analyses, ultimately aiming to construct the most plausible theoretical elucidation (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). It was paramount to clarify that the theories served as sensitising concepts rather than predetermined theoretical frameworks. This aligned harmoniously with the abductive rationale inherent in constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), which endeavoured to either formulate new theories or ingeniously combine existing ones to unveil "changed circumstances, additional dimensions, or misguided preconceptions" (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

4.9.5 Theoretical memos

The researcher wrote memos throughout each stage of this study. Writing theoretical memos was a vital approach to advanced data analysis. Reflexivity was integral to grounded theory studies, and active engagement with the data led to ongoing contemplation to uncover what the data was revealing (Charmaz, 2014). After analysing data, theoretical memos were recorded to formulate ideas and insights. As suggested by Charmaz (2014), theoretical memos could be anything written or drawn in the constant comparisons that construct a theory. When the researcher compared and contrasted events to events, and then evolved concepts and concepts, the memos were an important tool for perfecting and tracking the development of ideas.

4.9.6 Translation

After completing the data analysis, the researcher translated the findings presented in this thesis into English from Mandarin and used the back translation technique to ensure a high level of credibility for the translation. Constructivist grounded theory recognised that language was not neutral and the words the participants used to describe their experiences are influenced by their social and cultural contexts (Charmaz, 2021); therefore, the analysis of language was crucial in this study, and it required the researcher to pay close attention to the nuances of the language

used by the participants. The back translation technique was commonly used in cross-culture research to ensure that the data is accurately translated into the target language (Lor & Gao, 2020; Santos et al., 2015; Ozolins et al., 2020). Given that the interviews were conducted in Mandarin and the participants often used Chinese proverbs and culturally unique metaphors in their narratives, the researcher invited a Chinese and English bilingual scholar at Massey University to check the translated findings, including categories, codes and quotes. In addition, the researcher also invited a Chinese linguistics expert who has taught Chinese for more than fifteen years in Shenzhen to further clarify the Chinese proverbs and metaphors mentioned by the participants. To maintain the originality of language in this study, the researcher provided some of the Chinese terms or phrases mentioned by the participants, as supplementary material for readers.

4.10 Theoretical saturation

The researcher discontinued the data collection and analysis when reaching the theoretical saturation. According to Charmaz (2014), theoretical saturation was defined as "the point at which gathering more data about a theoretical category reveals no new properties nor yields any further theoretical insights about the emerging grounded theory" (p. 345). Theoretical saturation determined when the data collection was discontinued in a grounded theory study (Charmaz, 2021). Given that the connotation of the word 'saturation' was generally considered as a type of categorical completeness without room for additions, the phrase theoretical saturation was described as a "misleading metaphorical picture" (Nelson, 2017, p. 556). To make it clear in constructivist grounded theory, Charmaz (2014) stated that a theory was less likely to be completely exhaustive as contexts and conditions might change over time. In addition, the interpretation of new ideas would result in further development of the theory, and it might not be feasible for the researcher to fully understand everything about the researched phenomenon (Charmaz, 2014). This view was consistent with Glaser et al. (1968) who point out that:

> "*One is constantly alert to emergent perspectives that will change and help develop his theory. These perspectives can easily occur even on the final day of study or even when the manuscript is reviewed in page proof; so the published word is not the final one, but only a pause in the never-ending process of generating theory.*" (p. 40)

Theoretical saturation was also seen as theoretical sufficiency in constructivist grounded theory. Charmaz (2014) suggested that theoretical sufficiency could be reached when "you

have defined, checked and explained relationships between categories and the range of variation within and between your categories" (p. 213). In other words, once the researcher obtained an adequate amount of data for a certain level of theoretical sufficiency, the substantive theory was initially formed and disseminated. Therefore, theoretical sufficiency could be understood as "an ongoing, cumulative judgment that one makes, and perhaps never completes, rather than something that can be pinpointed at a specific juncture" (Saunders et al., 2018, p. 1901). This was because theoretical sufficiency could continue as a developing process if new and emergent ideas provided further insight to enrich the explanation of the theory (Constantinou et al., 2017).

In this study, there was no further data collection needed after interviewing 32 participants. This was because the researcher considered that the amount of data collected up to this point was sufficient to reach the theoretical saturation. Specifically, around 90 per cent of the interviews (n=29) were conducted for one to two hours, and the researcher obtained sufficient and detailed insights from the participants. No new insights and categories were formed after the interview with the 27th participant. In other words, the information collected from the 32 in-depth interviews was sufficient to explain the nature and development of *qiling* in Shenzhen's workplace. The researcher also considered conducting follow-up interviews in order to obtain new and updated experiences from the participants. However, the experiences provided by the participants were complete and all happened in the past. As a result, no follow-up interviews were conducted in this study. In addition, this study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences within a Chinese context (i.e., Shenzhen). Therefore, generalising the findings based on a large and representative sample was not the intention of this constructive grounded theory study (Charmaz, 2014).

The researcher also considered other qualitative studies on reaching theoretical saturation to ensure that the sample size of this study was sufficient. Although there was no consistent answer to the question of how many interviews are sufficient to reach theoretical saturation (or sufficiency), existing studies provided a reference in terms of achieving the saturation point. Several factors, for example, the scope of the study, the heterogeneity of the studied population, and the adopted methods and their actual applications (e.g., the duration of interviews) played a certain role in reaching saturation (Saunders et al., 2018). According to the analysis of around 550 doctoral studies adopting a qualitative interview as their primary research method, the most common sample size in qualitative studies was between 15 and 50 participants, and the average

sample size was 31 participants (Mason, 2010). Of this, the average sample size in grounded theory studies was twenty participants. In terms of studies with large sample sizes, one particular study involving sixty in-depth interviews found that saturation was reached within the first twelve interviews and the main categories were formed in the first six interviews (Guest et al., 2006). Therefore, the above evidence further ensured that the sample size of this study was sufficient to achieve theoretical saturation.

4.11 Ethical considerations

A full ethics application for conducting this study was approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC) (application number: NOR 20/40). Before submitting the ethical application, the researcher considered potential ethical issues from the following two processes: considering relevant ethical codes and discussing with colleagues experienced in cross-culture research and supervisors. In terms of ethical codes, the *Massey code of ethical conduct for research, teaching and evaluations involving human participants* (Massey University Human Ethics Committee, 2017) and *China's ethical review system* (Zhang et al., 2020) were considered in this research. As a result, except for the three common ethical issues, including (1) informed consent, (2) voluntary participation, and (3) privacy and confidentiality, the potential harm that could arise from participants discussing their experiences should be more considered. To minimise this harm, the researcher identified support avenues for participants, for example, apps providing online counselling for mental health issues by Chinese registered doctors and listed these on the participant information sheet (see Appendix C in detail). During the data collection period, due to the domestic restrictions for the COVID-19 pandemic in Shenzhen, for example, lockdowns, self-isolations, and travel restrictions, using apps for telehealth and counselling services became popular and provided convenience for the public (Figueroa & Aguilera, 2020). Therefore, it was appropriate to direct the participants to an app for counselling when necessary. Specifically, if participants felt very upset and needed support when talking about their experiences, they were suggested to seek mental counselling on the apps. As a result, no participant reported the need of counselling support during and after the interviews.

4.12 Methodological rigour

This section explained how the researcher promoted methodological rigour in this study. Methodological rigour played a crucial role in determining the worth of empirical research (Manuj & Pohlen, 2012). The quality of a grounded theory study might be evaluated using

various sets of criteria (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). Birks and Mills (2015) proposed contemporary criteria for quality grounded theory research, including (1) researcher expertise, (2) methodological congruence, and (3) procedural precision. These three components were discussed below to indicate the methodological rigour of this study.

4.12.1 Researcher expertise

The researcher's expertise was important to determine the success of this constructivist grounded theory study, as it ensured that the study was conducted in a thorough and accurate manner (Birks & Mills, 2015). As Charmaz (2014) stated, in constructivist grounded theory research, the researcher was not only a neutral observer in constructivist grounded theory research but also an active participant who engages in ongoing reflection and analysis. This indicated that the researcher's knowledge, skills, and experiences play a significant role in shaping the research process and outcomes. As a doctoral student, the researcher engaged in various educational activities, including the Advanced Research Methods in Business course, research skills development workshops, grounded theory workshops, and qualitative analysis workshops, in order to enhance competencies and confidence in the entire research process. In addition to these learning activities, the researcher was continually reading and accessing academic resources related to constructivist grounded theory. In terms of academic knowledge and experiences related to the research topic and context, the researcher has been researching workplace bullying since conducting his master's study. Further, the researcher grew up in Shenzhen and worked in both state-owned and private companies in the city. Therefore, the researcher's skills, knowledge, and experiences contributed to enhancing the quality of this study.

4.12.2 Methodological congruence

The second component in assessing the methodological rigour in grounded theory research pertained to methodological congruence. According to Birks and Mills (2015), methodological congruence occurred "when there is accordance between your personal philosophic position, the stated aims of your research and the methodological approach you employ to achieve these aims" (p. 56). The preceding sections of this chapter elucidated the researcher's philosophical standpoint, and the methods implemented in this study maintained consistency with the constructivist grounded theory approach. Additionally, the researcher bolstered the study's credibility in adhering authentically to the constructivist grounded theory through the incorporation of three key practices: (1) reflexivity, (2) member checking, and (3) peer review.

4.12.2.1 Reflexivity

Given the role of the researcher in co-constructing the understanding of the nature and development of *qiling* in a Chinese context with participants, reflexivity was explicitly encouraged in this constructivist grounded theory study (Charmaz, 2014). As Birks and Mills (2015) defined, reflexivity was "systematically developing insight into your work as a researcher to guide your future actions" (p. 52). Reflexivity in this grounded theory study involved showing how decisions were made and how the researcher's own assumptions and personal experiences were managed (Engward & Davis, 2015; Gentles et al., 2014). The researcher's previous experiences and personal views were reflexively managed to prevent bias from unduly influencing the research. Reflexivity occurred throughout this study, and the researcher wrote memos and reflective notes to record the content of reflexivity. Therefore, by following a constructivist grounded theory approach, the researcher embraced reflexivity with the acknowledgement that his research background in workplace bullying and knowledge of the research context contributed to theoretical sensitivity.

4.12.2.2 Member checking

Member checking was adopted to enhance the trustworthiness of this study. Member checking aimed to obtain (1) feedback from participants, (2) their reaction to the data and findings and (3) their response to the researcher's interpretation of the data which are obtained from them as individuals (Birt et al., 2016). In this study, the researcher conducted member checking by restating, summarising and paraphrasing for clarification within the interviews. For example, the researcher asked the participants to further explain the metaphors and proverbs they mentioned. The probing questions in the interview guide (see Appendix I) also facilitated the immediate member checking during the interviews.

4.12.2.3 Peer review

The design, implementation and findings of this study received ongoing peer review throughout the study. First, the researcher obtained support from his supervisors at monthly supervision meetings. Second, the proposal of this study (i.e., confirmation report) covering the literature review, research gaps and requestions, and methodology were peer-reviewed by scholars of the Healthy Work Group (HWG) in the Massey Business School as well as academic staff in the

School of Management at Massey University. Third, this study was peer-reviewed by the Ethics Committee and obtained full ethics approval. Fourth, the researcher discussed the implementation and findings with his PhD colleagues and HWG members. To obtain feedback from other scholars and industry practitioners, the researcher discussed the research findings with them at academic seminars and individual meetings. The peer-review process enabled the researcher to improve the reliability of this study.

4.12.3 Procedural precision

In order to ensure the procedural precision of this study, the researcher carefully designed and conducted the study with the guidance of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). The concept of meticulous procedural adherence was underscored by Birks and Mills (2015), who asserted that "careful attention to the rigorous application of grounded theory methods is critical if you wish to develop theory that will be judged as a quality product" (p. 36). This chapter elucidated how the fundamental elements of constructivist grounded theory were rigorously implemented in this study, encompassing: (1) deferring an all-encompassing literature review to prioritise theory development driven by data, (2) embracing theoretical sampling, (3) fostering theoretical sensitivity, (4) coding and memoing, and (5) achieving theoretical saturation (or sufficiency).

4.13 Summary

This chapter presented the research design and methods used for sampling, data collection, and data analysis, which were underpinned by a constructivist grounded theory approach. In addition, this chapter also included ethical considerations and implications for methodological rigour.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: THE NATURE OF *QILING*

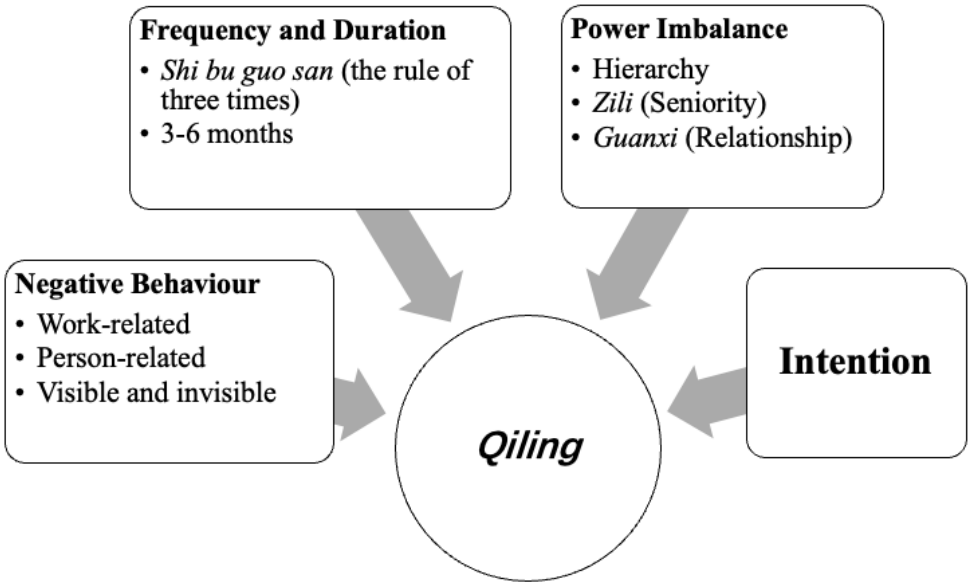
5.1 Chapter overview

This chapter reports the significant findings and discussion about the nature of *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen (i.e., the first research question). Given that the interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, excerpts from the interview transcripts were used and translated into English in order to develop the substantive explanatory frameworks which emerged from the findings. While acknowledging the inherent complexity of key terms around translation, for the purposes of data collection and analysis and reading fluency, the terms *qiling* and bullying are viewed as synonymous. However, an evaluation of this claim (i.e., exploring the nature of *qiling*) inevitably formed a central part of this research, as discussed in section 3.3. The findings constructed from the data were discussed in relation to bullying literature developed in European countries as well as other Asian countries.

The nature of *qiling* was constructed from the experiences of the participants. When asked about their experience of *qiling* at work, as expected, all of the participants (n=32) believed that they knew the concept and were able to explain their experiences. No participant asked for the definition of *qiling* during the interview, although the researcher prepared a dictionary definition. According to the information collected from the participants, several themes emerged regarding the nature of bullying in the workplace of Shenzhen. The themes included (1) negative behaviour (see section 5.2), (2) frequency and duration (see section 5.3), (3) intention (see section 5.4), and (4) power imbalance (see section 5.5). As a result, a conceptual model describing the nature of workplace *qiling* from the perspective of employees in Shenzhen is presented in Figure 5.1, and these four themes and their related sub-themes were also included.

Figure 5.1

Initial Model of Explaining the Nature of Qiling



5.2 *Qiling* behaviour

By analysing the experiences and descriptions of the participants regarding *qiling* at work, the behaviour was one of the main categories to emerge. This is in line with the theoretical understanding of bullying developed in European countries (Einarsen et al., 2011) and several Asian studies pointing out that negative behaviour is a key definitional element of workplace bullying (Kwan et al., 2020; Seo, 2010; D'Cruz et al., 2018). Informed by the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014), the European typology of bullying behaviours (as discussed in section 2.2.1), including work-related, person-related, and physically-intimidating bullying (Einarsen et al., 2020), was considered as a sensitising concept to analyse the data collected from the participants. As a result, two main sub-categories, including work-related and person-related were constructed from the data. However, under the category of work or person-related *qiling*, a new sub-category, including visible and invisible *qiling*, was constructed and discussed in the following section. A typology of negative behaviours experienced by participants is presented in Table 5.1 below, along with how many participants' experiences reflected each of the behaviours respectively. The behaviours were ordered based on the frequency mentioned by the participants.

Table 5.1

Qiling Behaviour in the Workplace of Shenzhen

Category	Sub-Category	Items
Work-related *qiling*	**Visible *qiling***	• Being required to work out of working hours (n=25) • Being exposed to an unmanageable workload (n=16) • Having work performance ignored (n=9) • *Shuaiguo* (Scapegoating) (n=8) • Excessive monitoring (n=3)
	Invisible *qiling*	• *Chuanxiaoxie* (Making things hard implicitly) (n=25) • Refusing to provide support (n=15) • Hindering career development or promotion (n=10)
Person-related *qiling*	**Visible *qiling***	• Treating unfairly (n=13) • Taking credit for others' work (n=8) • Threatening (n=6) • Attacking verbally (n=3)
	Invisible *qiling*	• Undermining self-confidence (Workplace PUA) (n=10)

5.2.1 Work-related *qiling*

In terms of work-related *qiling*, six visible behaviours, that could be directly observed by targets, were constructed from the data. These behaviours included (1) being required to work out of working hours (see section 5.2.1.1), (2) being exposed to an unmanageable workload (see section 5.2.1.2), (3) having work performance ignored (see section 5.2.1.3), (4) *shuaiguo* (Scapegoating) (see section 5.2.1.4), and (5) excessive monitoring (see section 5.2.1.5). Compared to the visible negative behaviours, most of the participants (n=25) mentioned that workplace *qiling* in Shenzhen could happen "invisibly". This referred to indirect ways to harm employees but was difficult to be perceived by a target within a short period. In other words, invisible *qiling* behaviour in the workplace refers to indirect actions taken to harm employees that are not easily perceived by the target, often taking time to recognise.

> *"[The manager] will not abuse you directly. He may* ***punish you secretly****. For example, he can fill in a hole for you and let you go ... This can be regarded as a kind of secret harassment. He didn't obviously insult you, but he made you indirectly wronged. This is also an invisible behaviour."* (P015)

The invisible behaviours included *chuanxiaoxie* (making things hard implicitly) (see section 5.2.1.6), refusing to provide support (see section 5.2.1.7), and hindering career development or promotion (see section 5.2.1.8). An analytical memo regarding the invisible bullying behaviours was shown in Box 1 below.

Box 2

Memo: Invisible Negative Behaviour

Analytical memo: Invisible negative behaviour
With the data collection and analysis conducted, I realised that some of the *qiling* behaviours mentioned by the participants were more likely to be invisible due to the impact of Chinese culture. Therefore, the *qiling* behaviour from the perspective of the participants might be more invisible and indirect rather than direct and obvious.

5.2.1.1 Being required to work after hours

The majority of the participants (n=25) considered frequently working out of working hours as a type of work-related *qiling*. Specifically, working overtime (1) without pay and (2) without an appropriate reason were the two main conditions that were less likely to be tolerated by the participants. For example, while "*working overtime or on the*

weekend was acceptable if the work arrangement is reasonable" (P023), being forced to work overtime without "*notification in advance*" (P003) or "*providing an appropriate reason*" (P017) was an unacceptable behaviour from the participants' perspective. In addition, one participant reported that he was often asked by his line manager to work after hours without pay (P011).

> "*I have personally experienced that when I worked for the fourth year, my direct leader would often call me on Saturdays and Sundays, saying that you would go to the company to do a temporary job. Then there is* ***no pay for working overtime****. Correct. Then he was very anxious and asked me to hand it over on Monday. Correct. This is probably the case for me. The experience lasted for about a year or so.*" (P011)

It was also noted that being required to reply to work-related messages or enquiries outside of working hours (e.g., weekends, holidays, and late nights) was also considered as the third condition that was not tolerated by the participants (n=8). For example, one particular participant described that she was often asked to respond to her line manager's communication on the weekend or in the middle of the night (P004). While the job responsibility of the participants did not require them to work or reply to work-related enquiries after working hours, they were more likely to face further bias or unfair treatment by their line managers if they did not "listen" (P027) or "follow" (P014) the managers' arrangement.

> "*Especially in private companies, overtime work is very serious. My manager will organize a lot of WeChat groups, and then let everyone be able to arrange tasks in the group on* ***Saturday, Sunday, or after 12.00 AM****, and then he will* ***ask everyone to actively respond to his message****. For example, to take the simplest example, the leader may randomly send something to the group, and then some colleagues who would like to please the manager will immediately reply. If some colleagues didn't reply or disagree with his arrangement, the manager may think that they are not responding to him.* ***The manager will be biased against them.***" (P004)

Due to the frequency mentioned by the participants, it seemed that being required to work after hours commonly happened in the Chinese workplace (i.e., Shenzhen). However, Chinese employees may tolerate this behaviour and feel powerless although

they have had the awareness of this negative behaviour. In comparison, this type of behaviour was not reported in the bullying behaviours in European countries (Einarsen et al., 2020; Jahja et al., 2021; Salin et al., 2019). Conversely, this behaviour was in line with the studies exploring bullying behaviour in Asian countries, such as Malaysia (Kwan et al., 2020; Kwan et al., 2014). To be specific, being requested to work without pay was considered as a work-related bullying behaviour in the Malaysian workplace (Kwan et al., 2020). This seemed to reflect one of the main cultural differences between the European and Eastern countries. Chinese culture, particularly Confucian dynamism, is characterised as having high power distance (Jaw et al., 2007; Klein et al., 2022), which indicates a hierarchical relationship between higher management and subordinates (Begley et al., 2002). Therefore, bullying seems unavoidable for employees in countries with similar Chinese cultural factors, for example, Malaysia, as most perpetrators of bullying are superiors, who misuse their power to intimidate or undermine subordinates (Kwan et al., 2020).

Given the cultural influence of high power distance and collectivism (Jaw et al., 2007), employees in Shenzhen may feel compelled to work after hours to indicate respect for their managers' arrangement and ensure that work tasks can be completed on time to protect the group's interests (e.g., benefits and project success of companies). However, the three conditions mentioned above, including (1) working after hours without pay, (2) working after hours without an appropriate reason, and (3) replying to work-related enquiries out of the working schedule, are considered as negative behaviours that can cause "severe physical and mental issues" (P004) to employees as well as financial losses. While the first condition is supported by the Malaysian study (Kwan et al., 2020), being required to work after hours without an appropriate reason and reply to work-related enquiries outside of the working schedule are two relatively new conditions found in the Chinese workplace compared to other Eastern studies on bullying behaviour at work. In addition, given that it is often difficult to justify if a person is bullied based on work-related bullying alone (Einarsen et al., 2020), these three conditions provide a supplement to the behaviour of working after hours.

5.2.1.2 Being exposed to an unmanageable workload

Half of the participants (n=16) reported that being exposed to an unmanageable workload was a type of *qiling* in the workplace. It was reported that managers over-allocated tasks so that employees were not able to finish the tasks on time. For example, one participant (P007) explained that, on the surface, the managers encouraged them to complete the allocated tasks; however, practically, the workload of completing these tasks was obviously unmanageable. This behaviour was also an antecedent of working overtime; therefore, employees were likely to experience a high level of stress and loss of their work-life balance (P010).

> *"We work overtime in two situations. You have to work overtime because of the heavy workload. Because you want to evaluate work performance, this directly affects your salary and promotion, which makes you have to choose to complete. On the other hand, the manager tells you clearly that this is to be done over time. I will let you take a holiday, but you have to finish it first. That's it."* (P019)

The behaviour of being exposed to an unmanageable workload has been widely reported as a type of work-related bullying in European countries (Einarsen et al., 2020). Similarly, it is also consistent with studies of bullying in Asian countries, such as Malaysia (Kwan et al., 2020), Vietnam (Nguyen et al., 2020)), India (Rai & Agarwal, 2017a), and South Korean (Seo, 2010). More specifically, based on a mixed-methods study exploring and examining bullying behaviours in the Malaysian context, the behaviour of "being requested to do an excessive amount of work" is considered as a type of work-related bullying by employees and has been accordingly included in the Malaysian workplace bullying measurement scale (Kwan et al., 2020). In the same vein, this behaviour is similar to the findings in South Korea, such as "continuous excessive workload" (Seo, 2010), as well as in India, including "unrealistic deadlines" (Rai & Agarwal, 2017a). This can mean that being exposed to an unmanageable workload is a common work-related bullying behaviour in both European and Asian countries.

5.2.1.3 Having work performance ignored

Several participants (n=9) reported that some employees' performance was ignored by their line managers, and this behaviour was considered as a type of work-related *qiling*. For example, one participant (P026) mentioned that the manager intentionally ignored

a few of their employees' performance even though they performed well. It was because those employees did not often please their managers or over-performed better than other employees who were valued by the managers. Therefore, the managers were likely to intentionally ignore the work performance of those employees. As a consequence of this behaviour, these employees whose performance was ignored by their managers reduced work enthusiasm and productivity. More worryingly, employees making better achievements might "lose confidence in the company and management and no longer work hard as usual" (P001). This also prompts the status of *taingping* (lying flat) in the workplace. *Tangping* was considered as a cultural phenomenon where employees, particularly young employees, tended to adopt a passive or indifferent attitude towards career advancement or personal ambition in the workplace (Zhuang, 2022). It entailed embracing a minimalist approach to work, prioritising leisure and relaxation over traditional career aspirations and societal expectations.

> "…*but he (the manager) is just* ***turning a blind eye to your work****. Maybe an employee he likes occasionally does one or two things. In his mouth, he will help the employee tell everyone how well he is, and then he may be biased towards the employee when there is a performance bonus at the end of the year. And for those employees who leaders don't like, like us, or employees who are not very pleased with him, even if you work hard, he will not give you more rewards or even your deserved performance.*" (P026)

Compared to the bullying behaviours reported in European countries as well as in some Asian countries, such as Malaysia, India, and South Korea, having work performance ignored seems a relatively unique behaviour in the Chinese workplace. Although the European bullying literature points out that ignoring someone's opinions is considered work-related bullying (Einarsen et al., 2020), ignoring work performance seems to be a severe behaviour that causes harmful impacts on targets of bullying. This is not only a type of unfair treatment to employees, particularly high-performing employees, but also promp ts an unhealthy workplace environment. Given that high-performing employees play a crucial role in improving employee engagement and effectiveness (Bin & Shmailan, 2015), ignoring their performance by managers may reduce employee loyalty and satisfaction and accordingly increase turnover intentions (Ekhsan, 2019). In addition, Chinese employees, particularly young employees, are more likely to learn

from the experiences of senior or high-performing employees. Ignoring employee work performance by managers can foster a negative working atmosphere that employees' performance is not well valued by the company and management. Accordingly, employee performance and effectiveness will be reduced or no longer enhanced.

5.2.1.4 *Shuaiguo* (Scapegoating)

Several participants (n=9) mentioned that *shuaiguo* (甩锅, scapegoating) was a type of work-related *qiling* and often caused by a lack of accountability by managers or colleagues. The term scapegoating encapsulates the deliberate act of shifting one's own failures onto another person, making them bear the consequences (Faladetta & Gervasi, 2023). Similarly, according to the participants, *shuaiguo* referred to the shirk of accountability, and it indicated that a perpetrator intended to transfer his/her own contradictions to a person and let the person take the blame. The Chinese term *shuaiguo* was frequently used to describe the behaviour of scapegoating by the participants. It was reported that the perpetrators did not recognise a mistake caused by them and blamed it on others. For example, one particular participant explained that *shuaiguo* arose from the manager's inability to accept their faults due to concerns over losing face, which leads to victimising others through unjust blame. This behaviour is seen as a form of bullying because it forces a subordinate to endure the repercussions for mistakes they did not commit.

> "*I think it's just to see who is more reasonable. If they are the unreasonable party, then it is because of their own face problems, and then they will be forcibly harassed. I feel like this is bullying, it's just* ***shuaiguo*** *(scapegoating).*" (P003)

As an interchangeable term of *shuaiguo* in English, scapegoating has been mentioned in the European bullying literature. Scapegoating refers to the act of blaming or holding responsible a person, group, or thing for a problem or wrongdoing, regardless of whether they are actually responsible or not (Rosander & Blomberg, 2022). In the workplace, scapegoating is often used as a means of deflecting attention away from the real causes of a problem or shifting blame onto a convenient target (Rudes & Magnuson, 2019). This can be a harmful and unfair practice that can lead to discrimination, persecution and other negative consequences for the scapegoated individual or group. Bullying can also be explained with reference to the scapegoating

process within organisations (Hoel et al., 2001; Thylefors, 1987). Ambig uous situations, or situations where the real source of frustration is unclear, also represent fertile ground for the scapegoating process. In addition, as Hoel and Cooper (2001) point out, when the real source of conflict appears to be hidden from us or considered to be out of reach or impossible to influence, scapegoating may be a likely outcome. However, scapegoating is not included in the European bullying measurement tool to identify whether a person experiences bullying at work (Einarsen et al., 2020).

5.2.1.5 Excessive monitoring

A few of the participants (n=3) reported that line managers excessively monitored subordinates' working performance during the working hours, and this behaviour was also considered as a type of *qiling* at work. In addition, this behaviour also included a manager monitoring an employee's chatting information on work devices, such as smartphones or laptops. For example, one participant (P021) described this behaviour:

> *"I am often monitored by my manager on WeChat. First of all, he monitored [my chatting messages]. The premise of everything is that he monitors my WeChat [account]. I am always moving, and he is there to respond."* (P021)

This behaviour constructed from the data is consistent with the European bullying literature arguing that excessive monitoring of a person's work is a type of work-related bullying (Einarsen et al., 2011). Although over-monitoring employees' performance during the working hours are considered as bullying in both European and Chinese workplaces (Einarsen et al., 2011), monitoring employees' chatting information on work devices seems to point to an overlap between traditional workplace and cyber bullying. When working devices are involved, this is likely to make dilemmas of when monitoring becomes surveillance (D'Souza et al., 2017). However, the policies in China relating to employees' privacy have not clearly stated that employees' chatting information on work devices cannot be monitored by their managers, and also many of the companies in China have allowed the management to monitor employees' chatting messages on work devices, including computers and smartphones (Sohu, 2022).

5.2.1.6 *Chuanxiaoxie* (Making things hard surreptitiously)

After discussing the visible work-related *qiling* behaviours mentioned above, many of the participants (n=25) also reflected that there were several "invisible" work-related bullying behaviours in the Chinese workplace. It was because these invisible behaviours were difficult to be perceived directly in the workplace by the target of bullying. Of this, the behaviour of *chuanxiaoxie* (making things hard surreptitiously) was the most frequently mentioned by the participants (n=22). The Chinese term *chuanxiaoxie* literally means that a person gives someone small shoes to wear. However, as the participants described, it referred to that a perpetrator secretly made it difficult for a target to work in the company. The behaviour of *chuanxiaoxie* was often conducted by a line or senior manager to an employee.

> *"As Chinese, everyone knows that you may have experienced '**chuanxiaoxie**'. Maybe your line manager is dissatisfied with you. He will find some small things in daily work to come to make trouble with you. And then he will rise in height, and then talk about how serious the matter is, how many bad consequences you have caused, and take your chances of normal promotion or you may get some bonuses or benefits. Deprivation, he just finds some unimportant excuses to deprive your benefits and reduce your promotion opportunities."* (P001)

> "*He will find your troubles at work, and then slowly squeeze you out of the unit, and even use some small means to make you resign. Or even if you don't quit your job, as the saying '**chuanxiaoxie**', which will cause you a lot of trouble every day and make you unable to continue [to complete the task].*" (P004)

Unlike the bullying behaviours reported in European countries, this type of invisible behaviour seems relatively unique in the Chinese workplace. In addition, this behaviour has not been mentioned in bullying literature conducted in Asian countries, such as India, Malaysia, and Vietnam (D'Cruz et al., 2016; Kwan et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020; Seo, 2010). As explained in sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2, one of the main reasons is that the cultural value of harmony has influenced workplace behaviours in China (Yao et al., 2020). Therefore, given that organisations attempt to create a harmonious work environment, direct and obvious conflicts, such as physical and verbal attacks, are relatively fewer than in non-Chinese based countries. Although the relationship

between the perpetrators and targets of bullying looks harmonious on the surface, it is noted that the perpetrators are more likely to hiddenly attack or make work much more difficult for a single target in the Chinese workplace.

5.2.1.7 Refusing to provide support

As the second invisible *qiling* behaviour in the Chinese workplace, refusals by managers and colleagues to provide support was regarded as a type of work-related *qiling* by participants (n=15). It was reported that, when the targets of bullying sought assistance or guidance, their colleagues or line managers might find various excuses to refuse to provide support or assistance with a "polite and friendly attitude indicating that they really intended to support" (P005). In addition, they were likely to intentionally hide relevant and useful information that can help the target finish work tasks.

> *"I think there is bullying among colleagues. For example, you need to ask a certain colleague for some business, and then he may not answer for various reasons, and then not help you, and then hinder you from completing the business and hindering the realisation of the business."* (P013)

Although the behaviour of refusing to provide support has not been examined in the European bullying literature, several similar behaviours are found in Asian countries. According to Kwan et al. (2020), two common work-related bullying behaviours, including being asked to complete work without guidance and assistance, are recognised by the targets and witnesses of bullying in the Malaysian workplace. These two behaviours indicate that the perpetrators of bullying, particularly line or senior managers, require the targets (e.g., employees) to work but do not to provide necessary support, for example, clear guidance and professional support. In the same vein, the behaviour of refusing to provide support found in the Chinese workplace reflects that managers and colleagues are not able to provide any support when an employee needs a clear guidance or professional support to complete a task in the Chinese workplace. Seeking advice from managers and colleagues is a common phenomenon for employees in order to better work, particularly when completing a challenging or complex task.

While many of companies in China have attempted to develop a supportive working environment for employees (Cooke et al., 2019; Russo et al., 2018), a number of managers and colleagues are likely to indirectly refuse to provide support which can have negative influences on employees' work performance. It is considered as a type of invisible bullying behaviour from the perspective of employees in Shenzhen as the perpetrators of this behaviour are more likely to have a friendly attitude or various "*reasonable*" excuses in order to maintain a harmonious relationship with the targets in the workplace. Therefore, it is relatively difficult to identify the boundary between *qiling* and fair behaviour.

5.2.1.8 Hindering career development or promotion

As the third invisible *qiling* behaviour in the Chinese workplace, hindering career development or promotion by managers was regarded as a type of work-related bullying by the participants (n=10). It was reported that managers were more likely to have the "ultimate power" (P003) to develop or limit employees' promotion due to the high level of power distance in China. An invisible way of *qiling* by managers was to hinder employees' capabilities; therefore, employees might not have the opportunity to perform well to obtain a promotion. This behaviour was often conducted by the line managers of targets, and the targets could not clearly perceive how it happened. However, it also included several specific behaviours that could be perceived by the targets of bullying, including (1) withholding information which influences your performance and (2) being required to do work below the target's level of competence.

> *"As a newcomer, when you enter a large company, your story or experience might have been spread to your colleagues or senior management… Because the senior management cannot directly see your personal performance, your performance may be reported by your line manager or superior. If it is because of your personality or opinion that there is some conflict with your superiors, or your line manager simply doesn't like you. Then in such a way, some of your personal development may be restricted."* (P009)

> "*Bullying may be related to the content of the job. For example, you are arranged for some simple jobs that have no room for improvement and promotion, and then your technical ability may stagnate.*" (P004)

The behaviour of hindering career development or promotion also indicates how a perpetrator conducts *qiling* to a target in an invisible way. This behaviour is consistent with the bullying behaviours examined in European countries, such as "withholding information which affects your performance" and "being ordered to do work below your level of competence" (Einarsen et al., 2011). In addition, it can be also in line with other behaviours that limit an employee to demonstrate his or her competence at work. In the Asian context, for example, in the Malaysian workplace, the behaviours of being requested to do unnecessary work, which is not relevant to the job description or within one's ability, are regarded as bullying (Kwan et al., 2020). Although the behaviour of hindering career development or promotion is similar to the behaviours mentioned above in the European and Malaysian contexts, the main difference is that in behaviour of hindering career development, a perpetrator intentionally and unreasonably limits a target's promotion through various approaches.

5.2.2 Person-related *qiling*

In terms of person-related *qiling*, four visible bullying behaviours and one invisible behaviour emerged from the data. These invisible behaviours included (1) treating unfairly (see section 5.2.2.1), (2) taking credit for others' work (see section 5.2.2.2), (3) being threatened to complete tasks (see section 5.2.2.3), and (4) attacking verbally (see section 5.2.2.4). In addition, *chuanxiaoxie* (making things hard implicitly), as a particular *qiling* behaviour that was relatively difficult to perceive by the targets, was grouped into invisible *qiling* (see section 5.2.2.5).

5.2.2.1 Treating unfairly

More than one-third of the participants (n=13) pointed out that unfair treatment was a type of person-related *qiling* in the workplace. It was mainly due to the favouritism and discrimination of the perpetrators. Specifically, as the participants described it, this behaviour generally meant that a line manager was not willing to equally reward an employee according to work performance. In addition, it could also reflect that a line manager or team leader intentionally allocated tasks to subordinates. For example, it was reported that managers or team leaders were likely to allocate more trivial tasks to those who they did not prefer and "allocate fewer and relatively easier tasks to those

who they preferred when arranging teamwork" (P012). Furthermore, one participant (P002) stated that the team leader intentionally rewarded employees based on his/her preferred team members much more than those who performed well and made better achievements in the team. This highlighted an experience of perceived unfairness within a team setting, where a leader disproportionately rewarded a favoured team member and himself despite a collective effort to complete a project, neglecting equitable recognition and reward for all team members involved.

> "*At that time, I experienced one thing. That was, the leader assigned our four or five people to work on a task together. Then because there is a team member who was very important to the leader among us. In the end, after we all finished this project, it was actually a joint effort by every team member, and then the leader finally gave the greatest reward to himself and gave more reward to the person he preferred than other team members. So I think this is also an* ***unfairness*** *to us.*" (P002)

In addition, several participants (n=10) reported that female employees were more likely to experience unfair treatment than males. It was reported that organisations or managers might be biased against female employees because of their physical factors (e.g., pregnancy) and inadequate legal protection and organisational support for female employment. For example, one participant (P026) spoke of how female employees might suffer from an unfair demotion or were not able to obtain a promotion if they were pregnant or applied for maternity leave.

> *"The company or the leadership is just taking advantage of some legal inadequacy and not giving female employees reasonable rights and benefits. Of course, they will definitely lose profits. As far as the company is concerned, female employees may not be able to go to work after being pregnant, which is not a good idea for the company. It's a loss...but for women, the unfair treatment of bullying in some workplaces may be more."* (P026).

In addition, another participant (P009) pointed out gender discrimination in the workplace, specifically regarding recruitment and promotion, and highlighted instances where female employees face demotion or other negative consequences simply because they are pregnant, which was described as unfair treatment.

*"Now it feels that **women** are **discriminated** a little bit in this regard, for example, in terms of employee recruitment and promotion. Actually, I have seen some female employees who are going to be demoted or something because they are pregnant. ...These kinds of behaviours are **unfair**."* (P009)

The behaviour of being treated unfairly found in Chinese workplace is similar in both the European and Asian contexts. To be specific, having key areas of responsibility removed or replaced with more trivial or unpleasant tasks is a type of person-related bullying in most of European countries (Einarsen et al., 2020). Similarly, the perpetrators of bullying are more likely to replace targets' original responsibility with more repeated and time-consuming tasks in the Chinese workplace. As a result, compared to other team members who have the same accountability, the targets seem to undertake more trivial tasks without any additional reward. In addition, similar to the behaviour of being requested to undertake work which is supposed to be done by other co-workers found in the Malaysian workplace (Kwan et al, 2020), the target of this behaviour may be also required by the team leader to undertake their team members' work or team leaders if the work is relatively trivial and the team members have good *guanxi* with the team leader.

Unlike the work-related *qiling* of being exposed to an unmanageable workload as mentioned above, although the workload of the additional tasks allocated by a line manager or team leader is relatively manageable, this is a type of unfair task allocation within a team and is directed at a single target who is not favoured by the perpetrator. For example, a common situation is that a target of *qiling* may not have good *guanxi* (relationship) with the perpetrator; therefore, the target may experience this behaviour in teamwork. As mentioned above, the behaviour of treating unfairly found in the Chinese workplace appears to be caused by the favouritism and discrimination of the perpetrators. In addition, cohering with the statements of the participants regarding the issue of gender bias in the Chinese workplace, previous studies also indicated that female employees are more likely to experience bullying in the workplace (Gardner et al., 2020; Salin & Hoel, 2013). Apart from gender bias as one of the factors of discrimination mentioned by the participants, it seems that the quality of *guanxi* with

managers or team leaders (i.e., the preparators of bullying for this behaviour) is a crucial factor that influences who perpetrators choose to favour and discriminate against.

5.2.2.2 Taking credit for others' work

Some of the participants (n=8) mentioned that directly taking credit for others' work was a type of person-related *qiling* behaviour in the Chinese workplace. It was reported that line managers may "snatch the ownership" (P009) of subordinates' outcomes (e.g., reports, experiments, etc.) without permission. For example, one participant described her experience about ownership of her work report being taken by her manager (P015).

> *"For the report, you worked so hard to write [the report], the leader didn't do anything but only wrote his name in the Author column* ***without permission*** *from you. Your efforts are simply not reflected in the report. You didn't find this result until the report was published."* (P015)

In addition, some of the participants (n=5) who had less work experience in the company mentioned that senior colleagues took or snatched their work outcomes from junior employees because of the force of seniority (e.g., longer work experience in the company). When an employee's work outcome was taken by a senior colleague or manager, the victim was more likely to keep silent about this behaviour.

> *"[senior colleagues] take your work outcomes directly, and then said the outcome is made by them, because you don't know, because maybe others are more important than you in work experience… But as a newcomer, you don't know that you have worked hard and steadfastly. Your senior colleagues or manager may have already* ***snatched your outcomes*** *away, and you can* ***only keep silent and feel aggrieved****."* (P009)

While taking credit for others' work has not been included in the bullying behaviour in the European bullying literature, this behaviour found in the Chinese workplace is consistent with the bullying behaviours in Asian countries, such as Malaysia. According to Kwan et al. (2020), taking credit for the work done by someone else is regarded as a type of person-related bullying. Given the power hierarchy between managers and employees in the Chinese workplace, targets of *qiling* are less likely to refuse the request from their managers, even though their work is being taken by

managers. In addition, as mentioned in section 3.2, there are very limited policies and organisational measures to avoid this type of behaviour.

5.2.2.3 Being threatened to complete tasks

In sharing their experiences of *qiling*, some of the participants (n=6) mentioned being threatened by line managers. It was because supervisors, such as line or senior managers as well as team leaders, held higher power than employees. Therefore, the targets experiencing this behaviour were likely to be forced to finish work. For example, it was reported that line managers "used their power to force you to complete tasks that employees were not willing to accept" (P07).

> *"To me, if you think this thing is unreasonable and illegal. Yes, you want me to do this. He may act as your leader. He will use various ways to pressure you. For example, in addition to squeezing you out, he may* ***threaten*** *you..."* (P021)

Although the behaviour of being threatened to complete tasks has not been included in the bullying literature focusing on the European context, it has been examined in the Asian context. Specifically, the behaviour of being coerced or threatening to do work was considered as a type of person-related bullying from the perspectives of victims and witnesses of bullying in the Malaysian workplace (Kwan et al., 2020). This can be explained by a cultural difference between the West and East that both China and Malaysia have a higher level of power distance than many of the European countries (Kwan et al., 2014; Mishra et al., 2021). In addition, the cultural factor of long-term orientation in China may also encourage the phenomenon that employees should follow their supervisors' orders and arrangements although they are not willing to work. Therefore, while this type of *qiling* behaviour seems to be motivated by the Chinese culture, it still causes severe consequences to the targets.

5.2.2.4 Attacking verbally

A few of the participants (n=3) reported that they either experienced or witnessed verbal attacks by line managers or colleagues and considered this behaviour as a type of *qiling*. Specifically, the targets were likely to be humiliated or scolded by their supervisors and colleagues.

"Managers who are not highly educated like them are of lower quality, and they may ***humiliate*** *and* ***scold*** *employees, and this happens."* (P025)

"The trainee did something wrong before, and then I think his manager abused his trainee even more. Then the manager said dirty words to him, for example, your mother didn't teach you how to do it?" (P008)

However, the majority of the participants (n=25) claimed that although this behaviour exists in the workplace, it is less likely to happen compared to the *qiling* behaviours mentioned above.

"I think for China, there will be more implicit bullying. In our company because we still have a lot of people. They will not be overtly abusive or accusatory." (P013).

While the behaviour of attacking verbally happens relatively less frequently in the Chinese workplace (i.e., Shenzhen), it has been examined in many European and Asian countries. First, the European bullying literature examines several negative behaviours relating to attacking verbally, including (1) being humiliated or ridiculed in connection with the target's work, (2) having insulting or offensive remarks made about the target's attitude or private life, and (3) being the subject of excessive teasing and sarcasm (Einarsen et al., 2020). Similarly, there are also relevant bullying behaviours explored in the Asian context (e.g., Malaysia and South Korea). For example, two person-nature behaviours, such as being scolded without relevant reason and being made fun of, have been examined as workplace bullying in the Malaysian workplace (Kwan et al., 2020). In addition, the behaviours of attacking the private person and verbal aggression have been found in South Korean (Seo, 2010). Although there is a similarity between the European and Asian countries regarding the behaviour of attacking verbally, these bullying behaviours found in the Chinese context (i.e., Shenzhen) seem relatively more subtle than in the European context. It is because the majority of the participants believe that this type of behaviour rarely happens in Shenzhen although they recognise its existence.

5.2.2.5 Undermining self-confidence (Workplace PUA)

Around one-third of the participants (n=10) mentioned that workplace pick-up artist (PUA) was considered a type of invisible person-related *qiling*. The term PUA was originally developed to describe a phenomenon that males cheat females in order to attract their attention; later, it generally referred to men who are attracted to women and fascinated by them (De Waal, 2022). However, this term has been increasingly used to describe a phenomenon that superiors undermined subordinates' self-confidence at work in order to better control them on a spiritual level, although the term in the workplace context is much more complex than its original meaning (Wang, 2022). As described by the participants, workplace PUA could generally mean that the perpetrators of *qiling* constantly and intentionally undermined an employee's self-confidence through a series of measures. For example, workplace PUA referred to that "managers described exploitation as a reward, constantly refuted and attacked" (P018), "set complex tasks that cannot be finished" (P012), and accordingly "created anxiety" (P026) to their employees.

Given the nature of this behaviour, the perpetrators are more likely to include supervisors who have higher hierarchical power than employees, such as line (or senior) managers and team leaders. The main intention of this behaviour is to undermine or significantly reduce an employee's self-confidence as well as self-esteem. In addition, it may presumably increase their perception of their own standing. From the perspective of the perpetrators, workplace PUA was often seen as a behaviour of "criticising you for your own good" (P029). This was more likely to make it difficult to be detected. When experiencing PUA at work, the targets were more likely to feel "useless" (P017) and "helpless" (019) at work.

> *"… I think my manager* ***keeps denying me****. No matter if I am good or bad, he keeps denying me and thinks I can't. So that I have such an understanding of myself, that I really can't do it, and then I need to work harder and so on."* (P021)

> *"Generally speaking,* ***this situation (PUA)*** *maybe happened. For example, the manager said that your current graduation situation is not very good, and it is your honour to find such a good job. There are also more direct personal attacks. He said*

*to his employee that **you even can't do this thing well**, I don't know what your usage is. This is **a depreciation of self-worth**."* (P014)

*"In the Chinese workplace, **PUA** has a more common way, which is called a mere figurehead. In other words, he doesn't give you any work, and then leaves you with nothing to do but he doesn't say to fire you. He just lets you have nothing to do after you come to work every day, and he won't assign work to you."* (P023)

While the behaviour of undermining self-confidence (or workplace PUA) seems to be a unique behaviour found in the Chinese workplace, it overlapped with the bullying behaviour in the European context. Specifically, three particular behaviours reported in the European contexts, including (1) repeated reminders of targets' errors or mistakes, (2) being exposed to an unmanageable workload, and (3) hints of signals from others that the targets should quit their job, are related to this behaviour which is found in the Chinese workplace (Einarsen et al., 2011). First, to undermine an employee's self-confidence and esteem, the perpetrators of this behaviour are likely to continuously remind them of their mistakes or errors at work. This is also in line with the bullying behaviour found in the Malaysian workplace, such as being wrongly blamed if a target makes mistakes (Kwan et al., 2020). Second, the perpetrators may also set a task which is impossible to be completed by the targets. Similarly, this is relevant with the behaviour of being requested to do work that is not within the target's ability in the Malaysian workplace (Kwan et al., 2020). Third, the perpetrators may also hint the targets to quit their job, particularly if the targets are not able to follow their instructions in the workplace. Although the behaviour of undermining self-confidence overlaps the above three behaviours in the NAQ, it seems to be relatively more complex.

While the above three negative behaviours can be perceived by the targets of *qiling*, this behaviour is more likely to be considered as a type of invisible and indirect behaviour in the Chinese workplace. It is because the perpetrators seem to describe these negative behaviours that determine the targets' self-confidence and esteem as a type of "learning opportunity" that can help the targets improve competencies for their future career promotion and development. However, this type of description is more likely to be deceptive in order to confuse the targets to accept these negative behaviours.

Therefore, although employees may have experienced these negative behaviours, they may not clearly identify they are targets of bullying due to the deceptive encouragement of their managers.

5.2.3 Physically-intimidating *qiling*

In terms of physically-intimidating *qiling*, the behaviour of attacking physically emerged from the data.

5.2.3.1 Attacking physically

Compared to the two types of *qiling*, such as work-related and person-related behaviours, physically-intimidating *qiling* was relatively rare from the perspective of the participants. Over one-third of the participants (n=13) reported that physical *qiling* behaviour was less likely to be seen in their organisations. One participant did not believe that physically-intimidating *qiling* could occur in organisations in Shenzhen, China.

> *"I think that in the current workplace, most of the physical conflicts, such as beating people, may not occur. I think this is the current situation in Shenzhen."* (P001)

Two participants explained that physical *qiling* behaviours might be conducted by managers or employees who were poorly educated.

> *"Maybe in some private enterprises or private enterprises, some bosses or senior managers are not well educated. Because their education level is not high, their behaviour is relatively bad, and there may be beatings and scolding employees."* (P010)

> *I think this kind of physical conflict may exist, but I think it is a minority, and it is more likely to occur in groups with relatively low education."* (P011)

The behaviour of attacking physically has been found in the European bullying literature. Specifically, physically intimidating bullying is the third type of workplace bullying in the European context (Einarsen et al., 2011). Of this, two main specific behaviours include (1) intimidating behaviours such as finger-pointing, invasion of

personal space, shoving, blocking the target's way and (2) threats of violence or physical abuse or actual abuse (Serafin et al., 2020). In the same vein, according to a global study conducting a cross-cultural comparison on workplace bullying, it finds that personal harassment and physical intimidation can be largely seen internationally. However, work-related negative behaviours and social exclusion were perceived very differently in many of the Asian and European countries (Salin et al., 2019). While the participants of this research recognise the existence of attacking physically in the Chinese workplace, related cases have not been found in the workplace of Shenzhen. In other words, attacking physically is not perceived as a type of *qiling* from the perspective of employees in Shenzhen; however, it should be further examined by future research, for example, employing a quantitative research design to examine the prevalence of this behaviour in the Chinese context.

5.3 Frequency and duration

The theme of frequency and duration was constructed by analysing the *qiling* experiences of the participants. Two sub-themes including frequency (see section 5.3.1) and duration (see section 5.3.2) were formed to further explain how the participants considered themselves as experiencing *qiling* in the workplace. In addition, Section 4.3.3.3 provided further explanation regarding participants' attitude towards workplace bullying.

5.3.1 Frequency

When asked why they identified themselves as victims of *qiling*, a Chinese idiom *shi bu guo san* (事不过三, the rule of three times) was frequently mentioned by many of the participants (n=20). This idiom originally came from *Journey to the West* (西游记), which was one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature. As described in the novel, a person cannot intentionally make the same mistakes or errors more than three times (Lin, 2009). In addition, this idiom, as a part of Chinese culture, influenced how Chinese employees perceive and understand workplace behaviours. In terms of workplace *qiling*, the participants used the rule of three times as the criterion to identify whether they were targets. In other words, from the perspective of the participants, after the negative behaviour was experienced conducted more than three times by the perpetrators, they would consider that this was *qiling*. As the participants described, if

the negative behaviours (as mentioned above) happened once or twice to them, most of them could "tolerate" or further observe the perpetrator's behaviour. This was "*because you have to give others a chance, and then you have to give yourself a chance to check if it is right*" (P019).

> *"You have to say that you are aware of this matter. I will have this consciousness for the first time, but I might not judge subjectively whether this thing happened to me alone or not in the first place. The second possibility is also because, for example, you don't know the character of your leader and colleagues. You have to understand from what perspective he acts on you. I may find out with my colleagues, and then see what kind of thing this is for and what purpose it is."* (P026)

However, if the negative behaviour happened in the workplace more than three times, the participants would seriously consider the behaviour as bullying.

> *"The thinking of the Chinese is **shi bu guo san** (the rule of three times). As it's the first and second time, I tolerated your behaviour. But, if you conduct harmful behaviour for a long time, I think you really impact on me... But I think it's just the concept of **shi bu guo san**, and it will affect my emotion."* (P002)

> *"It depends on everyone's endurance. Like me, if it is **more than three times**, I think this is an abnormal thing."* (P003)

> *"So I think it appears once twice. In fact, from the perspective of Chinese people's patience, it is acceptable if it (the harming behaviour) happens once or twice. He can tolerate it, and he will still do his job well. In order to achieve your own value, it's okay, then to be patient and try to work as much as possible although it is not in the field or something that I am good at … So I think it's not the best situation like this, it's best to be three times, at most two to three times, and **not more than three times**."* (P004)

Shi bu guo san (the rule of three times) is related to frequency, which is one of the operationalisation of the NAQ. According to the European bullying literature, bullying is considered as repeated and persistent aggressive behaviours (Einarsen et al., 2020; Leymann, 1990). In other words, bullying in the European context is usually not a single

and isolated event. Instead, bullying behaviours that are repeatedly and persistently directed against one or more individuals (Einarsen et al., 2020). Similar to this criterion developed from the European context, bullying in the workplace of Shenzhen is also considered as a repeated behaviour. Therefore, in line with the European bullying literature, a single and isolated event cannot be fully considered as bullying. However, the rule of three times provides a further criterion to identify whether a person experiences workplace bullying from a perspective of Chinese employees in Shenzhen. To be specific, bullying in the workplace of Shenzhen is regarded as repeated and persistent negative behaviours, and a person becomes a target of bullying when the negative behaviours have happened at least three times.

5.3.2 Duration

While most of the participants pointed out the feature of frequency (i.e., the rule of three times) as a criterion to identify *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen, several participants (n=4) also mentioned the element of duration to justify whether they were victims of bullying. Of this, three participants stated that they considered the negative behaviour as bullying when it had continuously happened for around three to six months.

> *"Maybe for me it is not judged by the number of times, but by the time. Maybe this kind of majority is overtime. If I work overtime for more than* ***three months or longer****, I think this is serious workplace bullying, and most of them exist in Chinese companies."* (P013)

> *"I think it depends on a time period, it is the length of a time period. It may be said that you have found that you have been unable to devote yourself to doing things for a long time, and [this behaviour] has affected your entire mental state. I think this can be regarded as workplace bullying ... I think* ***three months to six months****, if I encounter this situation, it will be quite uncomfortable."* (P014)

The above statement made by the participants is consistent with the operationalisation of the NAQ (i.e., the feature of duration). Specifically, previous bullying literature focusing on the European context has stated that bullying experiences are likely to last for a long time (Einarsen et al., 2020). As Leymann (1996) claimed, the exposure of more than six months duration should be considered as an operational definition of

workplace bullying. Similarly, a number of bullying studies conducted in European countries have suggested that repeated exposure to negative behaviour within a six-month period is an appropriate time frame (e.g., Einarsen et al., 2020). However, it is also argued that targets may feel bullied after a much shorter time, and negative behaviours can be observed within shorter periods of time (Einarsen et al., 2020). Therefore, given that there is no consistent agreement on the duration of behaviours required to constitute workplace *qiling*, this research proposed that an exposure duration of around three to six months is considered as a definitional feature of workplace bullying from the perspective of Chinese employees in Shenzhen. Cohering with the findings relating to the frequency of workplace bullying mentioned in the previous section, a target of bullying can be identified if he/she experiences repeated negative behaviours more than three times within six months.

5.3.3 Tolerance for *qiling*

Most of the participants stated that they considered themselves as experiencing bullying by using the criterion of *shi bu guo san* (the rule of three times) or the duration of three to six months. However, the participants further explained that the factors such as age and interests (e.g., promotion and salary increase) might affect their tolerance of *qiling*. In terms of age, several participants (n=8) mentioned that younger employees, particularly for the post-90s generation, were less likely to tolerate *qiling* at work and more likely to be sensitive to this issue.

> *"If you don't care about bullying, for example, he said he can decide your promotion and salary increase, but I have learned that many* ***post-90s and post-00s*** *generations don't care about this position. He can change to another job. They will not accept bullying in the workplace, because now there are still more choices in the market for job selection and employment in China. I think bullying can be formed because this person has what you want, so it can control you." (P023)*

> *"I was born in 1994, and I am equivalent to a post-90s generation. But I found a status quo of* ***the post-90s****. In fact, everyone may have developed the country to a relatively prosperous stage. In most cases, I think that the post-90s generations also have their own ideas. I think maybe the children born after the post-00s generations have more ideas of their own. They are not limited to the form and blow of a*

company. They won't be able to say that they care about the level of a salary so much. Maybe for us at this stage, I think I will pursue a job with a higher sense of happiness. I will definitely not accept this behaviour." (P014)

The participants provided reasons to explain why post-90s generation employees were less tolerant of *qiling*. One of the reasons was that post-90s generation employees paid more attention to their occupational health and wellbeing; in comparison, the relatively senior employees were more likely to tolerate bullying due to the impact of organisational hierarchy and seniority. The following two quotes indicated the different attitudes towards bullying by age.

"As now, for example, employees born in the 90s and 00s enter the workplace, people of this generation, although I am also a generation of people born in the 90s, pay more and more attention to satisfying spiritual happiness or a sense of belonging at work. For example, in a healthy working environment, they will pay more and more attention to this generation." (P021, Age 25)

"You have to consider whether the workplace in the eyes of young people and the workplace in the eyes of our age is the same concept. If you mean that if there is no overlap between my work and his work, he will force me to assign tasks or push his work to me, or even push his personal affairs to me. The other person is indeed what I just said was my apprentice buying me a cup of tea, or what I did for my master. I don't think this is bullying. If it's a peer-to-peer job, you have to find a way to let me do something for you, and it's not very polite. I think this is a kind of bullying." (P12, Age 52)

Another reason was that younger employees (e.g., post-90s generation employees) were more sensitive about the issue of bullying.

"I may have a stronger awareness of this aspect (workplace bullying), and I think it will have a greater relationship with people of the generation … When the post-90s and -00s enter the workplace, their self-awareness will be stronger. It's not like, for example, those born in 1970s and 1980s may be more tolerant [with bullying]." (P026, Age 28)

Several participants (n=5) also explained that employees were more likely to tolerate *qiling* due to the factor of interests, for example, promotion opportunities and increased salary.

> *"He [the victim] should be very unhappy about being bullied, but he feels that if he can continue to do well, there is a certain chance. So his tolerance will be very high. He thinks it has a chance, because he has no other chance [to get promotion], or he thinks he has very little chance. He will take this as a breakthrough. In the face of this inappropriate behaviour or bullying relationship, he is willing to maintain it."* (P020)

> *"Because each person's work is linked to his KPI, and only by ensuring a good relationship with superiors and subordinates, the KPI will get a higher index. Relatively speaking, your income will be higher. In order to obtain a higher KPI index and higher bonus, everyone can only silently endure sincere bullying. Personally speaking, it may be more of a personal consideration of my own performance and KPIs. This may be more from the life pressure of Chinese employees. If I want to have a better life, I have to maintain high KPIs, so that I can get more bonuses to guarantee my job. So this kind of bullying can only be tolerated silently. You may choose to resign if you can't bear it for a long time, and most of them endure it like this."* (P013)

The factors of age and interests (e.g., promotion and salary increase) evident from the interviews indicated a tolerance of workplace *qiling* from a perspective of Chinese employees in Shenzhen. Specifically, young employees, particularly the post-90s generation, are less tolerant of workplace *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen. This phenomenon can be explained by the characteristics of Shenzhen. Shenzhen is a typical migrant city and a number of young employees come from various regions of China as well as different countries to achieve their career goals in the city (Xie & Li, 2017). In addition, to attract more talent to work in the city, the government of Shenzhen has developed a range of talent policies, for example, rewards and housing benefits for graduates with a higher education background (Shenzhen Human Resources and Social Security Bureau, 2022). This population diversity prompts the cultural innovation and diversity of Shenzhen. For example, four common cultural factors are found in this city,

including innovation, openness, equality, and inclusion. Therefore, employees in Shenzhen, particularly the post-90s and 00s generations, are more likely to have a better awareness on employee health and wellbeing and workplace issues, for example, *qiling*.

When facing *qiling* in the workplace, the post-90s generation employees in Shenzhen are more willing to tolerate this behaviour by taking various actions than other age groups. For example, they may stand up to express their attitude towards workplace *qiling* to the perpetrators. In addition, they are likely to quit their job if they cannot address this issue. This can indicate that this age group has less tolerance for workplace *qiling*. However, when considering career promotion and salary increase, employees in the workplace of Shenzhen may increase the tolerance for *qiling* in order to protect their interests.

5.4 Intention

The theme of intention emerged as most of the participants (n=30) mentioned it when expressing their experiences of workplace *qiling*. They considered the negative behaviour as *qiling* when it was "*intentionally conducted*" by perpetrators.

> *"I think it depends on his **intention**. If he [the manager] has such a character, and he treats everyone like this, we can only say that he has his personal qualities, right? But if he is only targeting me or a certain person, and his attitude is different, I must consider whether he is bullying me."* (P023)

For example, Participant 021 described that the manager intentionally threatened her in order to push her work harder rather than leaving the job.

> *"Then we will call when we are transferred, and we will definitely say that we will not give you good words, or **intentionally** discredit this situation. He [the manager] will use this kind of thing to threaten you to the end. If you leave your job happily now, we will get together and get together, and then when you look for a new job, we will give you good feedback."* (P021)

Similarly, Participant 024 reported that the manager intentionally gave him a negative review without an appropriate reason.

*"It is unreasonable for the manager not to be equivalent to this bad review, but because you have not made any mistakes, but the manager **intentionally** gave you a problem"* (P024)

While there is no consistent agreement on the feature of intention in the European context, it has become a crucial criterion, which is mentioned by most of the participants, to justify *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen. Previous European bullying literature stated that the intention of perpetrators to cause harm should be a crucial feature of bullying (Olweus, 2004; Saunders et al., 2007). However, intention is not considered a definitional feature of workplace bullying in most bullying research in European countries due to the difficulty of verifying the presence of intent in bullying cases (Einarsen et al., 2020). In comparison, bullying literature in Asian countries has included the feature of intention in the definition of workplace bullying. For example, according to a qualitative study exploring bullying in the Malaysian workplace, it found that bullying is considered as a series of negative behaviour with the intention to harm and victimise a single target (Kwan et al., 2020). Similarly, the feature of intention has also been examined from the perspective of employees in South Korea (Seo, 2010). Although this research found that intention has been recognised as a crucial definitional feature of workplace *qiling* from the perspective of employees in Shenzhen, examining its existence in bullying cases may become a concern and it needs to be further explored in the future research.

5.5 Power imbalance

The majority of the participants (n=30) mentioned that there was a power imbalance between targets and perpetrators of *qiling*. Apart from the hierarchy power between managers and employees, another two types of power, including *zili* (资历, seniority) and *guanxi* (关系, relationship), were also mentioned by the participants.

5.5.1 Hierarchy

When describing the perception of workplace *qiling*, most of the participants (n=30) mentioned that *qiling* was often conducted by line managers to subordinates. It was because line managers have the hierarchical power to "*order or instruct you*

(subordinates) to do anything" (P010). "*Because of the power gap, leaders may be more likely to bully their subordinates*" (P026).

> *"At this time, he (the manager) will use* ***the power of his position*** *to find a way to transfer you from city A to B, or transfer you from the person in charge of this department to another department that you are not good at. He used this method to bully you."* (P004)

> *"Because this right is given to the manager by the company, not his own ability. Because he is afraid of losing this right, he will continue to use this right to oppress others to demonstrate his own ability to use the right. Doing so can satisfy that anxiety deep inside yourself."* (P021)

Participant 001 referred to an old Chinese saying *guan da yiji yasi ren* (官大一级压死人) to describe the important role of hierarchical power in the workplace. This old saying translates to a person with a higher position could overwhelm the person with a lower position. This old saying illustrated that the status of superiors and subordinates are very different in Chinese workplaces. Even if a superior is only one level higher than a subordinates, they can control their subordinates. Given the respect and fear of hierarchical power, victims of *qiling* were more likely to keep silent or even leave their jobs when being bullied by their superiors.

> *"Many people understand [the old Chinese saying]* ***guan da yiji yasi ren****. Just as this old Chinese saying, even if they know they are bullying you. If you directly conflict with your superior, you will be hurt in the end. Therefore, most people will choose to remain silent or swallow their voices or leave their jobs."* (P001)

Participant 007 explained that the impact of hierarchical power on bullying was due to the influence of traditional Chinese culture that emphasised that subordinates should follow instructions and orders of superiors.

> *"The feeling is related to the cultural concept that our country has always had. The culture of seniority and inferiority has always been popular. Under the influence of this traditional culture and the Chinese workplace is a human society, many times the promotion in the workplace is often not entirely based on personal ability, and may not be as simple as other countries. It is somewhat subjective. Therefore, after*

everyone wants to please the leader or something like this, the leader will naturally feel that they are in a high position and have real power. So they may feel that their control or bullying of their subordinates may be a matter of course." (P007)

The power imbalance caused by the organisational hierarchy is consistent with the European bullying literature (Einarsen et al., 2020). The power imbalance between targets and perpetrators has been examined as a crucial definitional feature of workplace bullying, and it is likely to emerge from asymmetrical positions of power within organisational hierarchies (Einarsen et al., 2020). In addition, power imbalance is also associated with the ability to defend (Einarsen et al., 2020; Keashly & Jagatic, 2002). Given that employees have a lower hierarchical power than line or senior managers as well as team leaders in the workplace, this can cause an imbalance of hierarchical power. Furthermore, one of the cultural factors in China is the high level of power distance. Accordingly, employees in the workplace of Shenzhen are more likely to become the targets of bullying and lack the ability to defend themselves, particularly when the preparators are their superiors.

5.5.2 *Zili* (Seniority)

Around one-third of the participants (n=10) stated that perpetrators conducted *qiling* behaviour because they had a higher level of *zili* (seniority). According to the responses from the participants, it referred to the tenure of an employee working in a company. In other words, an employee has a higher level of seniority if the person had worked in the current company for more years than other employees working in the same company. It was reported that more senior employees would use the gap of seniority as a type of power to bully those working for fewer years, particularly new employees just entering the same company.

*"I work in a bank, a bank teller. Then in the first year of employment, because banks often talk about **seniority**, which is more serious, especially for older employees. You are a newcomer, and you are responsible for serving all the old employees. For example, you need to be more sensible, know how to serve tea and water, and clean up. Every morning, I was asked to help all the old employees clean up their public health earlier than others."* (P001)

"When we travel on business, there will be reimbursement and so on. Then, if we do reimbursement, The perpetrator relies on working in the company for a longer time, and then has a better relationship with the treasurer. Then he would tell the treasurer not to do my reimbursement first, and then he would do some small actions behind it." (P019)

However, a few of the participants (n=4) further explained that the impact of seniority varied across sectors (e.g., state-owned or private companies) and industries. For example, two participants explained that, compared to state-owned companies, employees in private companies and emerging industries were relatively more open-minded and paid more attention to capabilities and competencies than seniority.

"This depends on which industry you are in China. The workplace in China is divided into many industries, generally like the sort of seniority ranking, usually in state-owned enterprises or public sectors. Then there is a phenomenon that people with less seniority feel very suffocated by their senior colleagues. There is no way to solve it wherever you go. But like me in the Internet industry, it is actually relatively open-minded, because the industry is relatively new and innovative, and the people who work in the industry are generally of higher quality and lower age. The situation is slightly better." (P023)

Similarly, another participant (P018) shed light on the hierarchical culture within a state-owned company, where rank and seniority took precedence over actual ability, affording individuals undue respect and the means to potentially bully others with less tenure, regardless of their competence.

"Our state-owned company's system is also very obvious. If you have an extra star on your shoulder, you are more qualified than others. Although you are on the same level as them, everyone respects you very much. You have more confidence and experience than others. For example, it is actually like the seniority ranking. As long as this person joins the company earlier than you, this person is your senior. Although his/her ability may not be as good as yours, the person can still use some resources to bully you." (P018)

Apart from hierarchical power, seniority can be considered as a type of power which causes the power imbalance between targets and perpetrators of *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen, particularly between colleagues. While the power of seniority has not been explored in European countries, it becomes a crucial factor that perpetrators feel more powerful than targets. It is encouraged by a workplace culture in China that junior employees should respect and learn from senior employees (Guo, et al., 2015). In other words, employees with a lower tenure are more likely to follow the instructions and orders from their colleagues who have a higher tenure in the company. Although a colleague with a higher tenure has the same hierarchical position with a target in the company, the colleague can still bully the target due to the power imbalance of seniority. Therefore, seniority plays an important role in causing the power imbalance between perpetrators and targets of bullying in the workplace of Shenzhen.

5.5.3 *Guanxi* (Relationship)

Several participants (n=7) mentioned that *guanxi* (关系, relationship) could be considered as a type of power for perpetrators to conduct negative behaviour on their colleagues who have a poorer relationship with managers or those who have a relatively "higher social status" (P016).

> "*For example, your colleague has a good 'guanxi' (relationship) with his manager. Because you provoke him is equivalent to indirectly offending the manager, you are afraid to provoke him. Then this '**guanxi**' becomes a kind of potential power, and then he could come and bully you.*" (P015)

> *"Then you set up a small group and find a good boss to put pressure on this colleague. For example, if you want to be promoted, you are the person to be promoted. There is a person who obviously has a better '**guanxi**' with the superior. He will rely on the strength of the relationship with his superior, and then find pressure and trouble for other people who want to be promoted, so that they can't compete with you."* (P008)

The Chinese term *xiaotuanti* (小团体, small groups) was considered as a typical product developed by *guanxi*. It meant that several colleagues having good *guanxi* with each other were likely to form a small group in order to bully those who had relatively

poorer *guanxi* with them. When being asked about the perception of workplace bullying, several participants (n=7) reported that *qiling* could be conducted by a small group of colleagues to the target. The employees who "had less work experience" (P006) were more likely to be targeted by a group of relatively senior colleagues.

> *"If he does not like you, and then he pleases his colleagues, and talks something bad about you when chatting with them ... Over time, he may gradually make his colleagues dislike you."* (P005)

> *"Senior employees will hug them together… When you are out of the group with them, they start to bully you."* (P001)

Participant 22 further explained that "it might take time for senior employees to get to know a new or junior colleague"; however, "if they continue to exclude the junior colleague for a long time, this bullying behaviour is unacceptable".

Relatedly, those who "achieved excellent work performance" (P010) were also excluded by a group of colleagues.

> *"If it is workplace bullying between colleagues, he will definitely unite with other people, and he will definitely unite with other people to suppress you. Be isolated by them because of your outstanding performance or other reasons. So it is a phenomenon that should sometimes be a group versus an individual."* (P020)

Similar to seniority, *guanxi* is found as a type of power which can be used by perpetrators of workplace *qiling*. As discussed previously, *guanxi* plays an important role in building a connection between individuals to conduct a bilateral flow for personal or social benefits (Burt & Burzynska, 2017). According to the findings of this research, *guanxi* has been considered as a potential relationship power to cause the power imbalance between targets and perpetrators. As described by the participants, the presence of *guanxi*, whereby line or senior managers and employees have a close bond, may result in those in the out-group being the targets of *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen. This finding is also consistent with the understanding of bullying in South Korea (Kwan et al., 2020). Due to the influence of collectivism as well as *guanxi*,

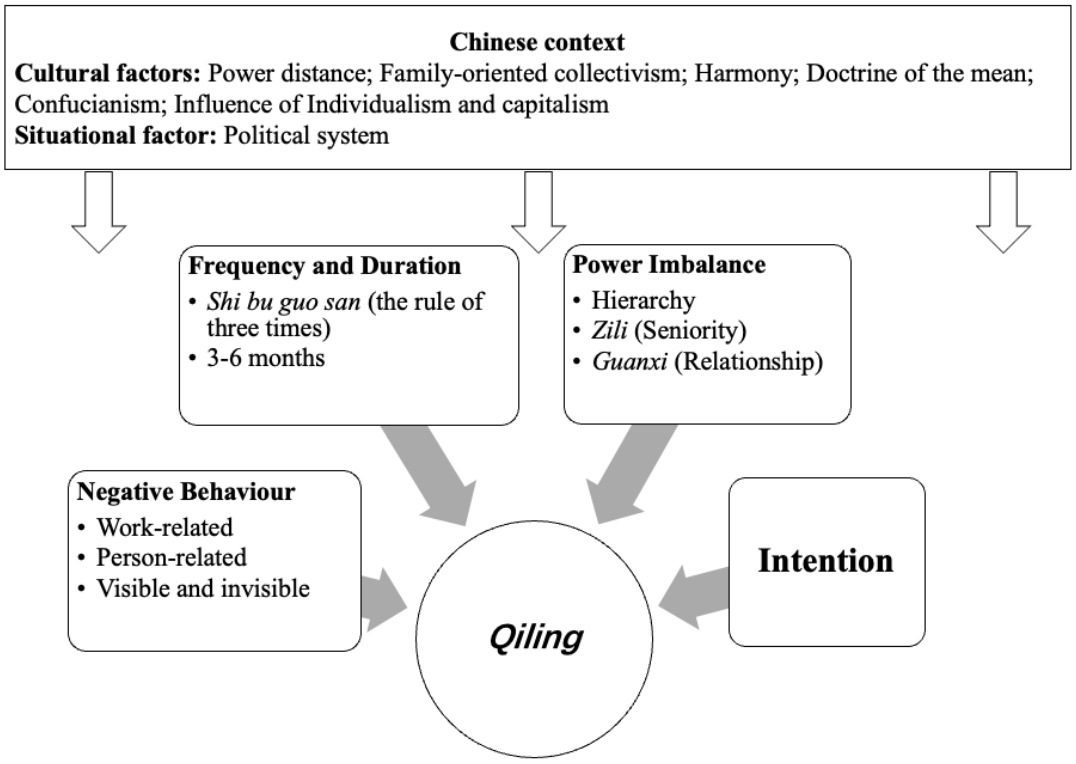
negative workplace behaviour, such as bullying, is likely to be conducted by a small group rather than a single perpetrator (Kwan et al., 2020).

5.6 Summary

This chapter presented the findings and discussion that addressed the first research question: what is the nature of *qiling* from an employee's perspective in Shenzhen. The emerging conceptual categories and themes along with the participants' representative quotes were presented. According to the findings, the nature of *qiling* developed in the Chinese context is similar to the nature of workplace bullying developed in the NAQ. Specifically, all three identified features of *qiling* are also present in the definitional discussions of bullying in the European literature. However, there are several differences within the features, such as the invisible and visible behaviours, the three-time rule, and three sources of power. In addition, intention is a crucial feature determining *qiling* in the Chinese workplace; however, it is not included in the key features of workplace bullying. Therefore, the findings show that, while the Chinese term *qiling* and the English term bullying can literately be used interchangeably, qiling is different from the academic understanding of bullying developed in The operationalisation of the NAQ due to the influence of Chinese cultural and institutional factors. As a result, the original model has been further developed in order to indicate the role of the Chinese contextual factors in developing the nature of *qiling,* as shown in Figure 5.2.

Figure 5.2

A Conceptual Model of Explaining the Nature of Qiling



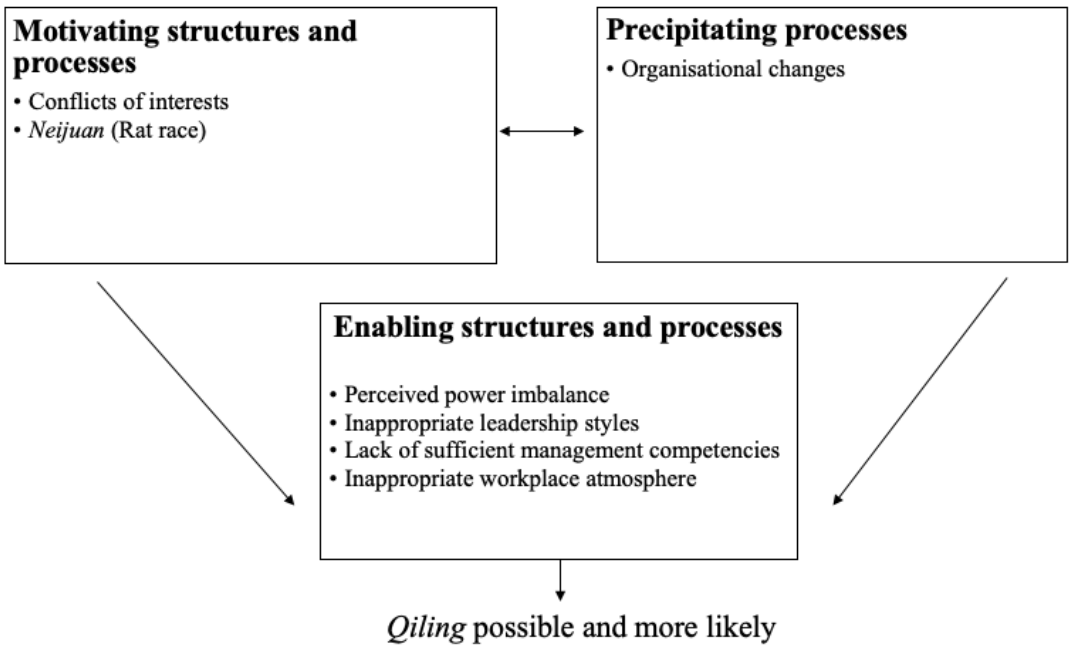
CHAPTER SIX: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: THE DEVELOPMENT OF *QILING*

6.1 Overview

This chapter presents the findings and discussion about the development of *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen (i.e., the second research question). As in Chapter 5, the terms *qiling* and bullying will be viewed as synonymous for the purpose of reading fluency. However, a comparison of the development of *qiling* in the workplaces of Shenzhen with the development of bullying in the European context would be presented in the discussion of the findings. Informed by the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014), the European theoretical framework explaining how workplace bullying develops (as discussed in section 2.5.5), was considered as a sensitising concept to analyse the data collected from the participants. As a result, three main themes, including (1) enabling structures and processes (see section 6.2), (2) motivating structures and processes (see section 6.3), and (3) precipitating processes (see section 6.4), and their related sub-themes were emerged from the data to inform a conceptual framework explaining the development of workplace *qiling* from the perspective of employees in Shenzhen, as shown in Figure 6.1.

Figure 6.1

Initial Framework of Explaining the Development of Qiling



6.2 Enabling structures and processes

The enabling structures and processes of *qiling* generally include conditions that make it possible for bullying to occur in the first place, such as factors providing fertile soil for *qiling* (Salin, 2003). Four sub-themes, perceived power imbalance (see section 6.2.1), adverse leadership styles (see section 6.2.2), lack of sufficient management competencies (see section 6.2.3), and coercive workplace culture (see section 6.2.4), were constructed from the data and can be grouped into the enabling structures and processes.

6.2.1 Perceived power imbalance

As discussed in section 5.5, power imbalance was identified as a key definitional feature of *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen. In terms of sources of power, three types of power, including hierarchy, *zili* (seniority), and *guanxi* (relationship), were emerged from the data. According to the previous literature, power imbalance is considered as an initial antecedent of bullying (Chirilă & Constantin, 2013; De Cieri et al., 2019; Einarsen et al., 2020). It is because, without the power imbalance between the two parties (i.e., perpetrators and targets), the targets can directly or indirectly resist negative behaviours in order to prevent bullying in the first place (Einarsen et al., 2020). Therefore, the importance of hierarchical structures and power imbalance in organisations seems to explain the large number of employees being bullied by line or senior managers. In the same vein, the findings constructed from the data also indicate the hierarchical power imbalance between targets and perpetrators. However, *zili* (seniority), and *guanxi* (relationship) are also considered as two sources of power in the workplace of Shenzhen. These two types of power can also make the targets feel powerless, and accordingly, they are unable to resist *qiling*. This provides a reference based in the Chinese workplace to shed light on that the perceived power imbalance between targets and perpetrators may not only come from hierarchical power. It can also come from informal power such as *zili* (seniority), and *guanxi* (relationship), in the workplace of Shenzhen.

In addition, according to the responses from the participants, several contextual characteristics , which contributed to employees being discriminated against and becoming targets of *qiling*, also emerged. Half of the participants (n=16) mentioned that discrimination was one of the initial factors to cause *qiling* behaviour. Specifically,

four main characteristics, including gender (n=14), seniority (n=13), personality (n=9), and geography (n=4), were mentioned as the basis of discrimination in the workplace.

Fourteen participants reported that female employees were more likely to be discriminated against than males in the workplace, especially when they were pregnant. This might further cause workplace *qiling*.

> *"Now it feels that women will be slightly discriminated against in this area, for example, in terms of entry, and then, as well as in terms of promotion. In fact, I have seen some women get downgraded or something because they are pregnant. These various behaviours are unfair."* (P009)

Participant 023 further explained that female employees who took financial responsibility to support their parents and children w ere also more vulnerable to bullying and had to tolerate more negative behaviour at work.

> *"I think that women are definitely a group that experiences more workplace bullying than men. When they are around 30-35 years old or 35 to 45 years old. She has parents and children to support. She has to endure bullying in the workplace. Because once she is out of work or retire, five social insurance, and two benefits, and then the medical insurance will lose everything, which is very miserable for her."* (P023)

Around one third of the participants (n=13) pointed out that those who just entered a company or had less work experience were vulnerable and more likely to be targeted by perpetrators of *qiling*, particularly in state-owned enterprises.

> *"Then there is another group of students who have just graduated, and students who have just graduated, because not every post-90s generation knows that many people who have just entered the workforce have no social experience, so they will be bullied by others."* (P023)

> *"State-owned enterprises are particularly obvious in terms of seniority ranking, and then they think you are new, and everyone is definitely bullying you. Even if they came a month earlier than you. People came earlier than you, so they can bully you so obviously."* (P032)

Several participants (n=9) mentioned that those who had a relatively weak personality were likely to be biased by their colleagues and line managers, and this could motivate bullying at work.

> *"I think this is also related to the personality of the employees, and it may be this type of person. A person who has been new to the company for 1 to 2 years and has a gentle and weak personality. They are more likely to be targets of bullying."* (P031)

A few of the participants (n=4) reported that some of their colleagues experienced bullying because they came from different regions and were not familiar with the local dialect.

> "*I think geographical differences can also lead to bullying. For example, I have a colleague from the north. Because he did not understand the dialect here, his local colleagues came together to bully him and laughed at him in dialects.*" (P002)

This can indicate that power differences relating to these four characteristics mentioned above (i.e., gender, seniority, personality, and geography) may also influence *qiling* behaviour. It seems that employees with any of these characteristics are perceived to have relatively less power and status than others. This finding is consistent with previous literature. For example, evidence shows that female employees are more likely to become targets of bullying than male in the workplace in many countries (Fajana et al., 2011; Salin, 2021; Wang & Hsieh, 2016). According to the *qiling* experiences of the participants, four groups of employees, including female employees, new employees, employees with relatively weak personalities, and employees from other regions of China or countries, are relatively easy to become targets of *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen. This means that organisational power differences seem to be relevant to societal power differences, and *qiling* may overlap with related phenomena such as discrimination in the workplace. Therefore, the Chinese government and organisations should pay more attention to developing national and organizational policies relating to the discrimination of vulnerable groups (as mentioned above) in order to better prevent and intervene in workplace issues caused by power imbalances (e.g., *qiling*).

6.2.2 Coercive workplace culture

Around one-third of the participants (n=12) reported that coercive workplace culture was likely to cause *qiling*. According to the descriptions from the participants, *qiling* in some companies in Shenzhen seemed to be permitted and accepted. For example, several companies were likely to have a workplace culture whereby new employees had to provide any service to those who had a longer tenure.

> *"I think the atmosphere of each company is different. After joining the company, in terms of qualifications, its atmosphere may be more serious, and the notion that newcomers must serve the elderly is more difficult to break. For example, some companies may have young employees or people of the same age, which may be relatively rare, so each company has a different atmosphere."* (P009)

In addition, some of the companies in Shenzhen encouraged employees to work overtime. Of this, as mentioned by the participants (n=8), the 996 working hour system (996 工作制) is a work schedule practised by many companies in China, particularly the Internet and international trade companies, in order to complete required tasks (Xiao et al., 2020). It requires that employees work from 9:00 AM to 9:00 PM, 6 days per week.

> *"But there are some industries, some companies are facing some foreign customers ... The boss motivates the culture of* ***the 996 system****. It creates this atmosphere, the company's overworking atmosphere, and then he caused this obvious workplace bullying."* (P023)

The theme of coercive workplace culture is not directly included in the framework of explaining workplace bullying in the European context proposed by Salin (2003). However, it is still relevant to the content of the framework and consistent with the findings of previous literature. According to Salin (2003), the factor of low perceived costs becomes a prerequisite for bullying to occur. This can mean that the perpetrators of bullying believe that the costs of engaging in this behaviour are relatively small. For example, the perpetrators are less likely to be seriously punished or dismissed by conducting bullying behaviours. Organisational culture has been considered as one of the issues causing the low perceived costs of bullying (Einarsen et al., 2011). Specifically, at a certain level, bullying in organisations in many European countries

appears to be permitted. In the same vein, according to the findings constructed from the data, given that some organisations in Shenzhen have a coercive workplace atmosphere, this is more likely to make *qiling* "reasonable" to the perpetrators.

Due to a lack of organisational support to protect targets of *qiling*, this also prompts a coercive workplace culture. Given the lack of policies and measures against bullying at work, the perpetrators of bullying are more likely to bully individuals without hesitation (Salin, 2003). Similarly, the lack of punishment against bullying and slow disciplinary processes and outcomes are considered as two of the main issues relating to organisational culture and climate (Motsei & Nkomo, 2016). Given that there are no national and organisational policies against *qiling* at work in China, this prompts a coercive atmosphere in the workplace of Shenzhen. As a result, the perpetrators of *qiling* are less likely to pay a huge price for this harm to the targets, particularly employees. This indicates the need to develop anti-*qiling* policies for the Chinese government and organisations in Shenzhen (as well as in other regions of China). Specifically, the government should be able to develop relevant Acts to prevent and intervene in *qiling* from a perspective of legislation. In addition, to foster a healthier and more sustainable workplace atmosphere and environment, organisations should develop a series of organisational policies and intervention approaches to punish the perpetrators of *qiling* and protect the right of the targets to resist *qiling*.

6.2.3 Adverse leadership styles

When being asked how workplace *qiling* might have happened and developed, several participants (n=8) mentioned that adverse leadership styles, particularly authoritarian leadership, could be an initial antecedent of *qiling*. For example,

> *"There are some authoritarian leaders. They will not listen to some of your suggestions, and the leaders will let you do whatever they want. No matter what you say, just let you do it, and do it as he asks. This kind of manager is very powerful … It is the kind that he thinks he is very powerful, but the actual instructions conveyed make employees feel very ordinary. And if the employee fails to do it, he will think you are not good enough, and then he will scold you."* (P017)

A few of the participants (n=3) referred to the Chinese term *yi yan tang* (一言堂, rule by the voice of one person alone) to describe the authoritarian leadership style. The term included both positive and negative meanings. On the one hand, it illustrated that a leader could quickly and efficiently make a decision or allocate tasks to subordinates. On the other hand, it indicated that instead of empowering subordinates and involving them in decision-making, this type of leader was more likely to be autocratic.

"*In China, it is now more popular called yi yan tang, which means that a single word of the leader can determine right or wrong. In this case, I think the leader's power is too large, and he will cause unfairness. Increasing unfairness will lead to a group of people who are often benefited to protect themselves, and then they don't want others to have more benefits than him.*" (P001)

Several participants (n=6) mentioned bureaucratism as a direct and indirect antecedent of workplace *qiling*. Bureaucratic leadership referred to a leader who arranged tasks to subordinates without considering actual situations and satisfied with his/her current hierarchical status. Similar to the laissez-faire leadership style, this type of leader was more likely to lack accountability and less likely to prevent and intervene in conflicts at work, particularly *qiling*. It was reported that although the bureaucratic leadership style might not directly cause person-related conflicts such as *qiling* in the workplace, it is more likely to motivate the occurrence and escalation of *qiling*.

"I think that some leaders are more bureaucratic, so this kind of bureaucracy will appear in ordinary companies. At present, many private enterprises have also been emphasising the issue of institutional growth and development, but because there will always be such bureaucratic leaders, they will only arrange tasks without considering the actual situation and ignore conflicts (bullying) in the company." (P004)

"Leaders do not intervene in workplace issues (bullying), and they indulge in these things. In fact, it is also a problem faced by most companies. Because no one intervenes in this matter, the bullying can only be allowed to be developed." (P021)

The theme of adverse leadership styles is also consistent with the contents of the framework proposed by Salin (2003). Previous literature examined that inadequate or weak leadership styles, for example, a laissez-faire leadership style, are associated with bullying at work (Salin, 2003). Therefore, *qiling* is likely to happen and develop when the management (e.g., line and senior managers) abdicate responsibility and do not want to intervene in the issue. Similar to the theme of coercive workplace culture discussed above, the connection between inadequate relationship styles and bullying can be also explained by low perceived costs for bullying (Salin, 2003). Based on the experiences of *qiling* from the participants, two types of inadequate leadership styles for line and senior managers, including authoritarian and bureaucratic leadership styles, have been found in the workplace of Shenzhen. Given the cultural factor of high power distance and the influence (Jaw et al., 2007), managers with an authoritarian leadership style are more likely to become the perpetrators of *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen. In addition, unlike the authoritarian leadership style, managers with a bureaucratic leadership style may not directly *qiling* employees; however, this type of leadership style can motivate the escalation of *qiling* as well as a coercive workplace atmosphere.

6.2.4 Lack of adequate management competencies

Around one-third of the participants (n=8) stated that *qiling* developed because leaders did not have adequate management competencies. Seven management competencies (i.e., professional knowledge, organising, accountability, communication, consideration, availability, and providing feedback) were identified from the participants' experiences of *qiling*. Due to the lack of these competencies, it was reported that managers were not able to effectively prevent and intervene in workplace *qiling*. Table 6.1 summarised the description of these management competencies and related sample quotes.

Table 6.1

Management Competencies Relating to Workplace Qiling

Management competency	Description	Quote example
Professional knowledge	• Lack professional knowledge to address questions asked by subordinates	*"For example, when he arranged things for you, he did not have the **professional knowledge** background himself, which led to an error in our final arrangement of employees, or some bad results occurred. Then it leads to you being scolded or insulted by employees, and so on."* (P023)
Organising	• Inappropriately allocate tasks to subordinates	*"His **work arrangements** are not perfect. This leads to the uneven distribution of tasks on everyone's hands, which may lead to conflicts, and this is also the case"* (P027)
Accountability	• Lack of the accountability for work arrangement	*"At this time, the leader said, if you make a mistake, the headteacher is responsible for shirking responsibility. The leader put out this sentence, this last semester was very detailed. This is the sentence every time, and the headteacher is responsible for it. There is an error, and it is always coming and going, you have to go to the proofreading. Then you have to know that this is a matter of money, 3,500 people per person, so many people in the class. If something goes wrong, how much can my headteacher lose? This leader really **shirks responsibility**, because if something goes wrong, it is equivalent to pushing us teachers into a fire pit."* (P006)

Communication	• Implicitly explain task arrangement and provide guidance to subordinates	*"Because the assignment of tasks is vague, it does not* ***make your subordinates clear the meaning of their superiors****. I'm not saying that leaders express their intentions and then directly let employees make judgments or let them make decisions. But you also* ***didn't give employees or subordinates a clear decision and tell them what the risks are and let employees do it directly****. Well, in the end, when there is a problem, it is actually thrown directly on the employee."* (P016)
Consideration	• Lack of compassion and empathy to subordinates	*"****Give care to subordinates and give them some daily help****, whether it is in life, family, or work. That's a good way to avoid conflict because I've felt it before. Because my mother was going to be hospitalized for a period of time, and I didn't go to work in the company during that time, and then the company leaders really brought the whole company to the inpatient department, and everyone gave my mother flowers and fruits, and then the leader gave some money to me. At that time, when my parents saw him, they would think that your leadership was really good to you. Even if I find out later that my leader may think that I can't do a certain aspect, I will feel that he is promoting you, and you must listen to his arrangements."* (P009)
Availability	• Provide insufficient time to communicate with subordinates • Lack of listening to subordinates'	*"I am not familiar with leadership. But when that senior colleague was spreading rumors there again, my leader* ***called and he would communicate with me****, and then I would not speak. Then when he called me to a meeting later, I would directly say that if I did something wrong, you said I could accept it. But if you haven't* ***listened*** *to me, come and accuse me. It would make me very unhappy."* (P019)

	opinions and concerns patiently	
Providing feedback	• Lack of providing feedback on time based on subordinates' performance	*"Managers should **give newcomers some feedback** in a timely manner, such as positive feedback. He can say to the employee that at some point today may have been good, and everyone thinks highly of you. This is because these employees may not be directly integrated into the work state in the early stage, and they may be more likely to feel your feedback. If you give him any good feedback, it makes them feel that they are being noticed, and it can prove that you can pay attention to a bright spot in them."* (P009)

While the theme of the lack of sufficient management competencies is not directly consistent with the contents of the framework proposed by Salin (2003), it has been considered as a necessary antecedent of *qiling* from the perspective of employees in Shenzhen. Similar to inadequate or weak leadership styles (as discussed in section 6.2.3), given that many line or senior managers have not sufficient management competencies, *qiling* or other interpersonal conflicts are relatively difficult to be prevented and controlled. Therefore, this theme is consistent with the criteria of the enabling structures and processes of workplace *qiling* and should be included in the category.

According to the participants, seven management competencies that were likely to cause workplace *qiling* were identified. Due to the lack of these management competencies by a line or senior manager, *qiling* is more likely to happen in the workplace of Shenzhen. These management competencies found in this research are relevant to previous studies exploring management competencies for fostering healthy work and managing bullying (Blackwood et al., 2019) as well as managing stress (Yarker et al., 2008). Specifically, three management competencies in the competency frameworks for (1) fostering healthy work and (2) managing bullying, including availability, communication, and individual consideration (Blackwood et al., 2019), overlap with the management competencies proposed in this research. In addition, several management competencies proposed in this research are also consistent with three management competencies for managing stress, including considerate approach, taking responsibility for resolving issues, and proactive management (Toderi & Sarchielli, 2016).

The findings suggest that line managers should enhance their management competencies (as mentioned above) in order to reduce the occurrence of workplace *qiling*. Given that line managers themselves are more likely to be a potential perpetrator of *qiling*, particularly in the workplace of Shenzhen as discussed previously, organisations should pay more attention to the training of management competency development. In addition, as individuals may often be promoted into management roles with little training on management or leadership (Blackwood et al., 2019), providing training on enhancing management competencies, particularly the competencies of

contributing to the occurrence of *qiling* found in this research, becomes vital to prevent *qiling* in the first place.

6.3 Motivating structures and processes

The structures and processes that provide initial conditions for workplace *qiling* have been discussed in section 6.2. According to Salin (2003), there are certain motivating factors (i.e., the motivating structures and processes for bullying) that can make it rewarding to directly or indirectly harass employees in the workplace. The motivating structures and processes for bullying in the workplace of Shenzhen included conflict of interest (see section 6.3.1) and *neijuan* (内卷, rat race).

6.3.1 Conflict of interest

Most of the participants (n=20) stated that conflict of interest was a crucial factor to motivate *qiling* in the workplace. Specifically, performance rewards (n=8) and promotion opportunities (n=15) were frequently mentioned by the participants regarding conflicts of interest.

> *"If colleagues compete for a **promotion opportunity**, conflicts of interest may arise. For example, the competition for the number of employees in the outsourcing department. What I want to say is that the promotion of the position is only for the possibility of competition, and there may be bullying."* (P003)

In addition, several participants (n=5) also mentioned that no transparency of incomes or information (*bei kao bei*, 背靠背, back-to-back) was likely to contribute to a conflict of interest. As described by the participants, the Chinese term *bei kao bei* referred to "employees only knew their own salaries, and the salaries of their colleagues and managers seemed to be not transparent in the company" (P001). Given no transparency of salaries, employees might secretly discuss their colleagues' or managers' salaries and even spread rumours although some companies did not allow employees to discuss other's salaries. Therefore, this seemed to further contribute to a conflict of interest.

> *"The opacity of wages in private enterprises is serious, and we call it 'bei kao bei' (back-to-back). Opaque wages and uneven wages can lead to conflicts, and ultimately lead to bullying; state-owned enterprises wages are relatively transparent."* (P001)

The theme of conflict of interest is consistent with the contents of the framework proposed by Salin (2003). Specifically, it is partly related to the factor of reward systems and expected benefits in the motivating structures and processes. When it comes to reward systems, it is likely to contribute to bullying. For instance, if management promotes an employee who performed well but succeeded by harming his/her co-workers, it seems to provide motivation for other employees to conduct the behaviour (Daniel & Daniel, 2020). In the same vein, combining the *qiling* experiences of the participants, some employees, particularly those who have a high level of work performance, are likely to be targeted by the perpetrators in the competition for a promotion or performance reward. They may be directly or indirectly harmed by the perpetrators using various approaches, for example, using *guanxi* with line or senior managers to unfairly treat these high-performing employees. In addition, reward systems based on the quantity of production and the rule of *bei kao bei* (no transparency of incomes or information) seem to cause severe consequences to group cohesion and harmony which are highly emphasised in organisations in China (Li & Zhang, 2010). It is because this may increase the perception of internal competition (Lawler, 2003) as well as the suspicion among employees (Perkins, 2018). Therefore, conflict of interest should become a crucial concern by the management in order to reduce the possibility of bullying or other interpersonal conflicts when developing a reward and promotion system.

6.3.2 *Neijuan* (Rat race)

Several participants (n=8) claimed that *qiling* was further motivated by excessive internal competition between employees within a company.

> *"Internal competition is getting more and more serious. This may cause the entire company and even the entire social economy to decline, and everyone is in panic. Then it may not lie in contentment that we may mean expanding out to grab someone else's cake at the beginning. When the overall environment is not good, it may intensify internal competition. Those with strong abilities will bully the weak."* (P011)

Of this, four participants mentioned the concept of *neijuan* (rat race). This concept usually refers to irrational desires to compete or be "competitive" (Ji, 2010). *Neijuan*, which is a multifaceted construal implying internal competition and conflict, substantially contributes to the all-pervasive. It meant that the cross-border phase with a large amount of effort and limited resources leads to a decrease in the individual's "result-to-effort ratio" (Meng-ying, 2021). According to the participants, *neijuan* was generally described as "excessive internal competition". Unlike general positive internal competition which can improve employees' work performance and productivity, *neijuan* was often considered as a negative and irrational internal competition which caused severe consequences to employees' physical and mental health in the workplace. It was reported that internal competition was "*particularly serious in Shenzhen than in other cities*" (P019). This factor may contribute to *qiling* in the workplace.

> *"Because in the big environment like Shenzhen before, people like those born in the 1970s and 1980s, the* ***neijuan*** *situation was not as intense as they are now. Like our post-90s generation, big companies have already started in Shenzhen, and you are not going to start a business, go to a big company to do these things, or stay in a small company. They are all things like working for people for a lifetime. If you have no other plans, you can only say that you are making the money in front of you first. You only care about your current interests, right?"* (P024)

Two participants further added that the issue of *neijuan* could cause other negative outcomes, for example, *tangping* (躺平, lying flat). *Tangping* was considered as a mentality that young people adopted to reject *neijuan* in the workplace (Yin et al., 2023). As described by the participants, the common actions of tangping included 1) "a significant reduction in work enthusiasm and motivation for promotion" (P012), 2) "a negative response to the requirement of management" (P014), and 3) "a decrease in expressing opinions" (P022). As striving significantly harder proved challenging to yield commensurate rewards and promotion opportunities due to *neijuan*, individuals were inclined to opt for a more passive approach, akin to *tangping*, and adopt a sedentary lifestyle.

"In such an involuntary situation, many people may not see the hope of going up. Nowadays, there is a very popular term, which is "tangping (lying flat)", yes. This has become a social problem. I think it can be seen that, for example, China in 10 years or in a few years is a low-desire society, because all its upward channels may have been blocked on a large scale, so I think this It may be a social problem." (P026)

The theme of *neijuan* is relevant with the factor of internal competition in the motivating structures and processes (Salin, 2003). Previous literature conducted in European countries noted that high internal competition is more likely to motivate bullying in organisations (Salin, 2003; Salin & Hoel, 2011). To be specific, competing for positions and achieving financial targets are considered as important sources of internal competition. In addition, social-economic conditions in a country may also influence the level of internal competition in the workplace (Motsei & Nkomo, 2016). Due to the competitive policy of talent attraction in Shenzhen, the phenomenon of *neijuan* seems more serious in organisations in this city than in other cities which have not developed and implemented talent attraction policies.

The phenomenon of *neijuan* can be used to shed light on various types of excessive internal competition in the workplace of Shenzhen. As one of the main advantages of implementing the policy of talent attraction, many organisations in Shenzhen can recruit more outstanding and qualified talent than other in regions of China as well as in global (Chen & Chen, 2018; Shenzhen Human Resources and Social Security Bureau, 2022). However, it seems to significantly raise the standard and requirement for job recruitment and promotion in organisations. In addition, the criteria for performance assessment and reward become much more demanding (Chen & Wang, 2017). Furthermore, it may also foster an unsustainable and unhealthy workplace environment where many employees compete with each other in various aspects which are not directly relevant to work performance. For example, many employees may work overtime with low work efficiency. While the work efficiency is relatively low, it is likely to please their line managers who believe they work harder than those who have not worked overtime. Therefore, to survive the excessive internal competition in the company, employees have to work much 'harder' than usual although this is not

required by their companies and may cause severe physical and mental health issues, for example, depression, exhaustion, and a high level of stress. More worryingly, *neijuan* has become a crucial factor that motivates bullying in the workplace. Therefore, the government and organisations should consider the negative impacts of talent attraction and recruitment policies to better reduce the development of bullying at work.

6.4 Precipitating processes

The initial conditions and motivations of workplace *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen have been discussed in sections 6.2 and 6.3 respectively. In addition, there are additional processes (i.e., the precipitating processes for *qiling*) which have generally been considered as the actual triggers of workplace *qiling* (Salin, 2003). The precipitating process for *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen included organisational changes (see section 6.4.1).

6.4.1 Organisational changes

Several participants (n=5) mentioned that organisational changes were likely to trigger *qiling*. It was reported that downsizing due to the impact of unavoidable crises (e.g., the pandemic of COVID-19 and financial crisis) might precipitate *qiling* in organisations. However, bullying might occur less when organisations take appropriate measures to protect employees' interests and benefits.

> *"At this time [when a company is facing* the pandemic of COVID-19 or financial crisis*], if there are indeed some changes in the organization, you can accept the transfer of positions for you. I don't think this kind of special situation should be considered bullying. But if it is because you really want to lay off employees, or because according to the system, if you take the initiative to lay off employees, you have to compensate the employees. At this time, the company does not want to compensate you, so it transfers you to another department or downgrades you, which makes you unable to accept it from a psychological point of view and voluntarily resign or something like that, so you can't get your compensation, or you won't be able to enjoy such a treatment as you should. That is to say, the leader uses his other ways to achieve his or the company's goals, and the parties suffer losses. I think this should belong to a type of bullying behaviour, so often my individual is in a vulnerable position."* (P004)

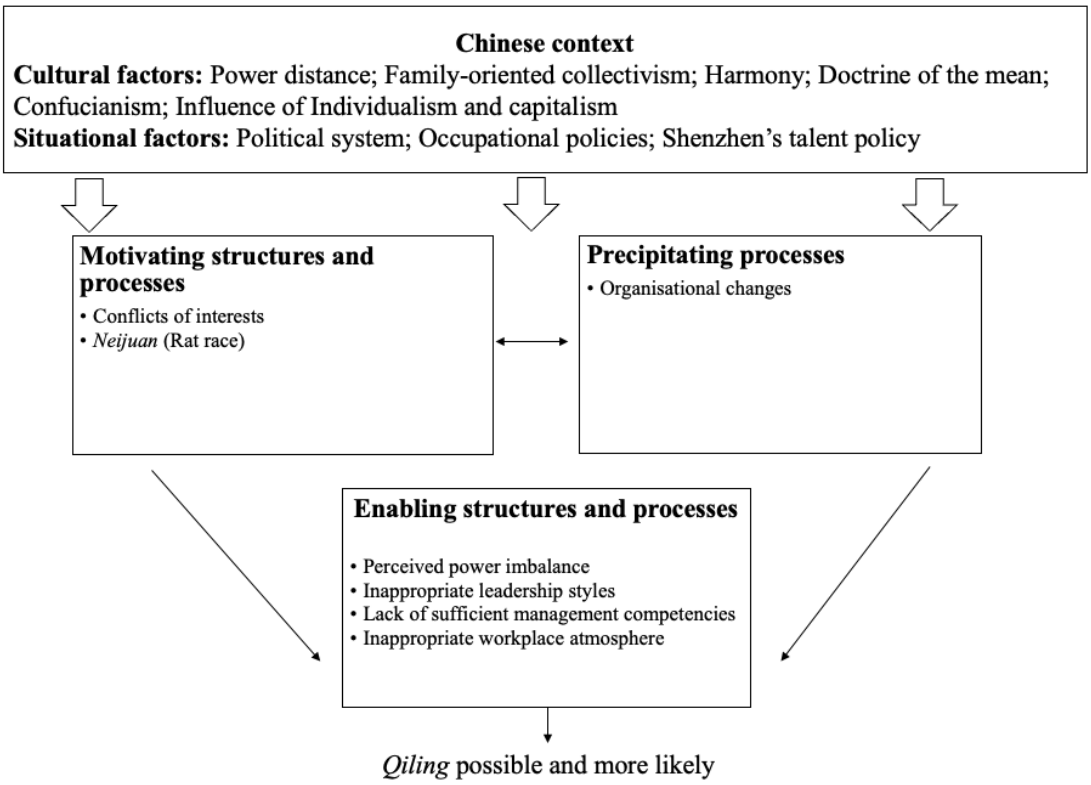
The theme of organisational changes is consistent with the contents in the precipitating processes of the framework (Salin, 2003). Previous studies have found that downsizing, restructuring, and other crises are likely to precipitate workplace bullying (Giorgi et al., 2020; Martin & LaVan, 2010; Motsei & Nkomo, 2016). To be specific, downsizing can lead to the elimination of positions, and accordingly, this may reduce promotion opportunities. As a result of downsizing, employees are more likely to have more workload, and the internal competition between employees seems more intensive. This seems to increase employees' stress and reduce their job security. Influenced by the Chinese culture of high-power distance (Hofstede, 2001), employees in Shenzhen are more likely to often follow the decisions made by the management in organisations and feel powerless to the organisational changes (e.g., downsizing). Therefore, employees may attempt to promote their own status, and they are likely to intentionally reduce their colleagues' work performance and status by *qiling*.

6.5 Summary

This chapter presented the findings and discussion that addressed the second research question: "what is the development of *qiling* from an employee's perspective in Shenzhen". According to the findings, the key organisational antecedents of *qiling* have been identified and accordingly formed a conceptual framework to explain how *qiling* develops in Shenzhen's workplace. As a result, the development of *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen can be explained from three perspectives, such as (1) enabling structures and processes (i.e., perceived power imbalance, coercive leadership styles, lack of sufficient management competencies, and coercive workplace culture), (2) motivating structures and processes (i.e., conflict of interest and *neijuan* (rat race)), and (3) precipitating processes (i.e., organisational changes). While some of the antecedents constructed from the data overlap with the theoretical framework developed in the European countries, several antecedents caused or influenced by Chinese cultural and institutional factors have been identified in the framework. To indicate the role of the Chinese contextual factors in conceptualising the development of *qiling,* the original framework has been further developed as shown in Figure 6.2.

Figure 6.2

A Conceptual Framework for Explaining the Development of Qiling



CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

7.1 Chapter overview

This chapter will start with an overview of this study (see section 7.2), and then summarise the findings for the two research questions and provide a comparison between *qiling* and bullying. Following this, the theoretical contributions and practical implementations are also discussed in sections 7.3 and 7.4 respectively. Finally, the limitations of this study and suggestions for future research are discussed in section 7.5.

7.2 Overview of this study

This study was designed to address two research questions, including what the nature of workplace *qiling* is and how it develops in the Chinese context (i.e., Shenzhen). Guided by the pragmatic research philosophy, this study explores the *qiling* experiences of 32 Chinese employees working in Shenzhen utilising a constructivist grounded theory approach. The following sections summarise the important contributions to knowledge brought about through this research.

7.2.1 The nature of *qiling*

To address the first research question (i.e., exploring the nature of workplace *qiling* in Shenzhen), four main features were constructed from the *qiling* experiences of employees working in the city and discussed in relationship to the existing bullying literature. The four features identified were (1) negative behaviour, (2) frequency and duration, (3) intention, and (4) power imbalance. Three of the identified features of *qiling* are also presented in the definitional discussions of bullying in the European literature. Intention is a crucial feature determining *qiling* in Chinese workplaces; however, it is not included in the key features of workplace bullying. When further exploring each of the features, there are many similarities and differences between *qiling* in the Chinese (i.e., Shenzhen) and European contexts. Overall, although *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen is generally similar to the European understanding of workplace bullying, *qiling* behaviours in the Chinese context seem relatively subtle and complex due to the influence of Chinese culture and situational factors.

In terms of the negative behaviour of workplace *qiling*, the behaviours constructed from the experience of employees in the workplace of Shenzhen are partly similar to the bullying behaviours which have been widely recognised in European countries. The *qiling* behaviours

in Shenzhen can be divided into work and person-related *qiling*, and this classification is generally consistent with the typology of workplace bullying in European countries. However, physically-intimidating bullying, which has been found in European bullying literature, seems to be not applicable in the workplace of Shenzhen. It is because, although the participants of this research recognise the potential existence of attacking physically in China, the related cases have not been found in the workplace of Shenzhen. Therefore, it should be further examined by future research.

In addition, the *qiling* behaviours in this particular Chinese context (i.e., Shenzhen) are more likely to be invisible than in the European context. Under the classification of *qiling* behaviour (i.e., work and person-related bullying), visible and invisible bullying behaviours are considered as a sub-classification. Specifically, four specific invisible bullying behaviours that are relatively difficult to perceive, including *chuanxiaoxie* (making things hard implicitly), refusing to provide support, hindering career development or promotion, and undermining self-confidence (workplace PUA), are found through a perspective of employees working in Shenzhen. The findings relating to the negative behaviours of *qiling* can indicate that *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen seems to be more subtle and indirect than in the European context due to the influence of Chinese cultural factors, such as harmony and collectivism. In other words, the perpetrators of *qiling* are more likely to harm employees indirectly and subtly but intend to maintain a harmonious relationship with the targets in the workplace.

In terms of frequency and duration, similar to the European understanding of bullying, *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen can also be considered as a repeated behaviour within a period of time (e.g., three to six months). In other words, in line with the European bullying literature, a single and isolated event is not understood to constitute as *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen. In addition, given the influence of the traditional belief of *shi bu guo san* (the rule of three times) in China, it provides a further criterion to identify whether an employee experiences workplace *qiling* in Shenzhen. Furthermore, this study finds that an exposure duration of around three to six months is considered as a defining feature of workplace *qiling* from a perspective of Chinese employees working in Shenzhen. Therefore, a target of *qiling* can be identified if he/she experiences repeated negative behaviours more than three times within six months.

In terms of intention, this study found that intention is a crucial feature of *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen. Although European bullying literature does not have a consistent agreement on the feature of intention, it has become a crucial criterion to determine *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen. In addition, this finding is consistent with bullying studies conducted in Asian countries, such as Malaysia and South Korea. Therefore, intentionally conducting negative behaviour to a target becomes one of the features of *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen. However, examining its existence in bullying cases may become a concern that should be examined in the future research.

In terms of power imbalance, this study found that power imbalance is a crucial feature of *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen. Specifically, this study identifies three sources of power that are likely to make targets of *qiling* powerless, including hierarchy, *zili* (seniority), and *guanxi* (relationship). The power of hierarchy is consistent with the findings in European bullying literature; however, *zili* (seniority), and *guanxi* (relationship), which have not been mentioned in European bullying literature, seem to become a type of subtle and indirect power to make perpetrators of *qiling* more powerful. In relation to the power of *zili* (seniority), it can be explained by a workplace culture in China that junior employee should respect and learn from senior employees. In relation to the power of *guanxi* (relationship), the presence of *guanxi* (relationship), whereby line or senior managers and employees have a close bond, may result in those in the out-group being the targets of bullying in the workplace of Shenzhen. The power of *guanxi* (relationship) is also in line with the understanding of bullying in Malaysia. Therefore, apart from the power of hierarchy, *zili* (seniority), and *guanxi* (relationship) can also play an important role in causing the power imbalance between perpetrators and targets of *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen. As a result, based on the above features constructed from the experiences of the participants, this study proposed a conceptual model explaining the nature of *qiling* from a perspective of Chinese employees working in Shenzhen.

7.2.2 *Qiling* and bullying

By exploring the nature of *qiling* from a perspective of employees in a Chinese context (i.e., Shenzhen), this study made a comparison between *qiling* and bullying. The Chinese term *qiling* directly translates to the English word *bullying*; however, this Chinese term has been in use since ancient China. In terms of the academic understanding of *qiling* and bullying (i.e., the definitional features and behaviours), this study identifies the similarities and differences

between *qiling* (in the Chinese context) and bullying (in the European context). First, the typology of *qiling*, such as work-related and person-related behaviour, is similar to bullying, and several *qiling* behaviours overlap with bullying. However, given the influence of Chinese traditional culture, some of the *qiling* behaviours seems more invisible and indirect in the Chinese workplace. Therefore, *qiling* can also be classified into visible and invisible behaviours, which is different from the dominant classification of bullying.

Second, while frequency and duration are the common definitional features for both *qiling* and bullying, they have different meanings. In terms of bullying, the frequency and duration can mean that bullying behaviour has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g., weekly) and over a period of time (e.g., about six months) (Einarsen et al., 2011). According to the experiences of employees in Shenzhen, China, the duration of *qiling* (e.g., about three to six months) is similar to bullying; however, the Chinese brief *shi bu guo san* (the rule of three times) is the main criterion to determine *qiling*. This criterion is different from the feature of frequency for bullying.

Third, intention is the key definitional feature of *qiling*, which is different from bullying. The dominant definition of bullying does not include the feature of intention as it has not received consistent agreement. However, it becomes a crucial feature to define *qiling* at work. Fourthly, power imbalance is the common definitional feature for both *qiling* and bullying. For the concept of bullying, the power imbalance can manifest in various forms, such as differences in hierarchical positions, authority, social status, and control over resources. In comparison, for the concept of *qiling,* the power imbalance between perpetrators and victims can manifest in three main forms, including position hierarchy, *zili* (seniority), and *guanxi* (relationship). Therefore, the sources of power are one of the importance factors to differentiate *qiling* and bullying.

Therefore, according to the above comparison, it sheds light the similarities and differences between *qiling* and bullying. This study states that the traditional understanding of workplace bullying may not be whole appropriate in the Chinese context, particularly Shenzhen. According to the definitional features of *qiling* developed from the experiences of employees in Shenzhen, this study proposes the following definition as a starting point for future research in this area:

"*Workplace qiling involves a series of visible and invisible negative behaviours affecting a target's wellbeing and work. To determine qiling, the qiling behaviour has to intentionally occur at least three times and over a period of time (e.g., about three to six months). The target of qiling can feel helpless due to power imbalance in position hierarchy, zili (seniority), and guanxi (relationship)*".

7.2.3 The development of *qiling*

To address the second research question (i.e., exploring the development of workplace *qiling* in Shenzhen), several key antecedents of *qiling* were identified from the experiences of Chinese employees working in Shenzhen. As a part of the theoretical coding process (Charmaz, 2014), a European theoretical framework explaining how workplace bullying develops was considered as a sensitising concept to further analyse and organise the antecedents of *qiling* (Salin, 2003). As a result, the development of *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen can be explained from three perspectives, including (1) enabling structures and processes (i.e., perceived power imbalance, adverse leadership styles, lack of sufficient management competencies, and coercive workplace culture), (2) motivating structures and processes (i.e., conflict of interest and *neijuan* (rat race)), and (3) precipitating processes (i.e., organisational changes). While some of the antecedents constructed from the data overlap with the European theoretical framework, several antecedents caused or influenced by Chinese culture and the characteristics of Shenzhen have been identified.

In terms of the enabling structures and processes of *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen, four main factors made it possible for bullying to occur in the first place. To be specific, first, the perceived power imbalance between targets and perpetrators from three aspects, including hierarchy, *zili* (seniority), and *guanxi* (relationship), are considered as an initial antecedent of *qiling*. This finding provides a reference based in the Chinese workplace to indicate that the power imbalance can come from formal power (i.e., hierarchical power), which is consistent with the European bullying literature. However, it can also come from informal power, such as *zili* (seniority), and *guanxi* (relationship), in the workplace of Shenzhen. Second, a coercive working atmosphere can also be an initial antecedent of *qiling* as it seems to be permitted and acquiescent in some companies in Shenzhen. Third, the factor of inadequate leadership styles also makes it possible for bullying to occur in the first place. Specifically, based on the experiences of bullying from the participants, two types of inadequate leadership styles for line and senior managers, including authoritarian and bureaucratic leadership styles, have been

found in the workplace of Shenzhen. Fourth, a lack of sufficient management competencies, which has not been mentioned in the European theoretical framework, becomes a crucial antecedent of *qiling*. Particularly, seven management competencies that are likely to cause workplace *qiling* have been constructed from the experiences of the participants. Due to the lack of these management competencies by a line or senior manager, *qiling* is more likely to happen in the workplace of Shenzhen.

The enabling structures and processes above explained the initial conditions for workplace *qiling*. There are certain motivating factors (i.e., the motivating structures and processes for bullying) that can make it rewarding to directly or indirectly harass employees in the workplace of Shenzhen. The motivating structures and processes for bullying in the workplace of Shenzhen included conflict of interest and *neijuan* (rat race). The factor of conflict of interest is consistent with reward systems and expected benefits mentioned in the European theoretical framework. In addition, reward systems based on the quantity of production and the rule of *bei kao bei* (no transparency of incomes or information) seem to cause severe consequences to group cohesion and harmony which are highly emphasised in organisations in China. In terms of *neijuan* (rat race), it is relevant with the factor of internal competition mentioned in the European theoretical framework. To be specific, competing for positions and achieving financial targets are considered as important sources of internal competition. In addition, due to the competitive policy of talent recruitment in Shenzhen, the phenomenon of *neijuan* seems more serious in organisation in this city than other cities which have not developed and implemented talent recruitment policies. Therefore, to survive from the excessive internal competition in a company, particularly in Shenzhen, employees are more likely to work 'harder' than usual although this is not required by their companies and may cause severe physical and mental health issues.

Following the initial conditions and motivations of workplace *qiling*, there are additional processes (i.e., the precipitating processes) which have been identified as the actual triggers of *qiling* in the workplace of Shenzhen. According to the experiences of the participants, organisational changes, such as downsizing and unavoidable crises including the pandemic of COVID-19 and financial crisis, are constructed and considered as the precipitating processes for *qiling*. Influenced by the Chinese culture of high power distance, employees in Shenzhen are more likely to often follow the decisions made by the management in organisations and feel powerless to the organisational changes (e.g., downsizing). Therefore, employees may

attempt to promote their own status, and they are likely to intentionally reduce their colleagues' work performance and status by bullying. In conclusion, based on the above three structures and processes and their related factors, this study has proposed a conceptual framework explaining the development of *qiling* from a perspective of Chinese employees working in Shenzhen.

7.3 Theoretical contributions

Combining the findings of this study with existing workplace bullying literature, this study provides three main original contributions. The first original contribution is that this study provides an evaluation to compare and contrast the similarities and differences between *qiling* and bullying. From a perspective of language, these two terms can be used interchangeably. Previous bullying studies conducted in China directly use the understanding of bullying developed in European countries (e.g., the definitions and measurement tools) as a theoretical foundation to examine its consequences and individual antecedents in China (Jiang et al., 2012; McCormack et al., 2006; Zhou et al., 2015). In the bullying literature written in Chinese, the Chinese term *qiling* is considered as a direct translation of the English term *bullying* and their academic definitions are considered as the same. It is recognised that these studies have provided valuable insights into understanding the concept in the Chinese context; however, the question of whether the academic understanding of *qiling* is the same as bullying was not well addressed. Given that an increasing number of studies point out the role of context (e.g., cultural and social-economic factors) in influencing the understanding of workplace bullying (Einarsen et al., 2011; Grimard & Lee, 2020; León-Pérez et al., 2021; Omari & Paull, 2015; Power et al., 2013; Salin et al., 2019b; Salin et al., 2020), it is valuable to avoid the influence of prior knowledge of bullying on participants' experiences in order to explore the concept (i.e., *qiling*) grounded in the Chinese context. Therefore, this study contributes to knowledge about *qiling* from the experiences of employees in a Chinese context (i.e., Shenzhen) and addresses the theoretical gap in the Chinese bullying literature.

The second original contribution is that this study provides a conceptual model to indicate the nature of *qiling* and identifies its behaviours existing in the Chinese context. Specifically, the model indicates the key characters in order to conceptualise the concept. This is in line with the studies exploring the nature of bullying as the cornerstone of understanding the concept (Einarsen et al., 2011). By analysing the characters and behaviours of *qiling* and bullying, the

similarities and differences between the concepts have been identified. In addition, given the contextual differences, including cultural and situational factors, the measurement tools of bullying developed in European countries may not directly be used to measure the prevalence of *qiling* in China. The proposed model and behaviours also provide an empirical reference for developing academic measurement tools of *qiling*. In addition, the proposed model and behaviours also provide evidence on understanding *qiling* in order to develop prevention strategies for managing the issue in the workplace.

The third original contribution is that this study identifies organisational antecedents of *qiling* grounded in the Chinese workplace and accordingly develops a framework to explain the development of this issue. According to a systematic literature review on the topic of workplace bullying in China, there are no empirical studies addressing the question of how bullying (*qiling*) develops in the Chinese workplace. The proposed framework addresses this theoretical gap in the Chinese bullying literature by providing evidence grounded in the experiences of *qiling* from employees in Shenzhen. In addition, the theoretical framework developed by Salin (2003) was used as a sensitising concept for the data analysis in this study. The proposed framework extends existing knowledge relating to the development of workplace bullying concluded by bullying researchers from European countries.

7.4 Practical implications

7.4.1 Implications for policy

This study provides practical implications for developing comprehensive anti-*qiling* legislation in China. Establishing anti-bullying legislation is considered as the initial step to prevent bullying at work. According to bullying research conducted in China, the prevalence of workplace bullying in the country was much higher than the international prevalence rate (Einarsen et al., 2020; Yang & Zhou, 2021). In addition, anti-*qiling* policies have not been published in China yet (Xiao & Peng, 2014). Hence, this prompts the need of developing of anti-*qiling* legislation to prevent the behaviour and protect employees from *qiling* in the workplace. It is recognised that the dominant understanding of workplace bullying and anti-bullying policies established in European countries play a crucial role in developing anti-*qiling* legislation in China (Einarsen et al., 2020). However, when using the dominant definition of bullying to determine whether a person experiences *qiling* in the Chinese workplace, behaviour and definitional elements that are unique in the context are not well-included. The findings of this study become the primary reference conceptualising *qiling* from the perception of

employees in Shenzhen. This provides new insight for the Chinese policymakers and government to define *qiling* and its behaviours in order to develop relevant policies for preventing and intervening in *qiling* in the Chinese workplace.

This study suggests that the Chinese government and policy makers should consider the identified definitional features to establish a clear legal definition of *qiling*. In addition, the *qiling* behaviours identified in this study can be used as guidance to help organisations and practitioners determine *qiling* behaviours in the Chinese workplace. The development of clear legislation against *qiling* is crucial as it is the corner stone of preventing and intervening in this issue in the workplace. Accordingly, by clearly conceptualising workplace *qiling*, the government can establish legal procedures and channels for reporting and investigating incidents and develop possible penalty approaches for perpetrators. This will address the existing legal gap of *qiling* in China. More importantly, the legal support will encourage victims to stand up to refuse *qiling* rather than tolerate this issue at work.

7.4.2 Implications for organisations

Based on the research findings, this study provides four implications for organisations in order to prevent and intervene in *qiling* in the workplace. First, this study provides a series of *qiling* behaviours as well as its definitional features founded in organisations in Shenzhen. This can be used as the criteria of *qiling* to develop organisational policies for identifying and *qiling* cases and developing prevention and intervention strategies. In addition, providing a clear explanation of *qiling* can strengthen the awareness of the behaviour for the management and employees in order to create a supportive organisational environment to refuse *qiling* at work. In addition, given that the coercive workplace atmosphere is an initial condition of *qiling*, organisations should foster a healthy and positive workplace atmosphere and culture to resist *qiling* in the first place. For example, organisations can develop and conduct regular assessments on the prevalence of *qiling* and evaluate the effectiveness of prevention and intervention strategies for *qiling*. As founded in this study, youth employees are paying more attention to their individual wellbeing at work and less likely to tolerate *qiling* at work. The effective measures and a supportive workplace environment against *qiling* can better retain and attract talents for the sustainable development of organisations.

Second, the findings of this study indicated that the power imbalance between targets and perpetrators of *qiling* can be caused by hierarchy, *zili* (seniority) and *guanxi* (relationship).

Therefore, the management in organisations should pay more attention to the impact of these three sources of power on developing negative behaviours at work (e.g., *qiling*). Considering the negative impact of these sources of power on employee behaviour, organisations in China should improve management systems and approaches to minimise the possibility of using these sources of power to harm employees by managers and colleagues.

Third, the findings of this study stress the need of leadership training and assessment for preventing and intervening *qiling* at work. Given that adverse leadership styles and the insufficient management competencies of line managers are likely to make it possible for *qiling* to occur in the first place, organisations should further improve leadership and management competency training relating to *qiling* for managers. Particularly, according to the *qiling* experiences of employees, seven management competencies, such as professional knowledge, organising, accountability, communication, consideration, availability, and providing feedback, are identified as key competencies for reducing the possibility of *qiling*. In other words, if managers are incompetent in these competences, this may develop *qiling* in the workplace. Therefore, organisations should consider including these management competencies in their training and assessment programmes for managers, in order to create a healthier work environment.

Fourth, as the conflict of interest and issue of *neijuan* (rat race) become motivating factors for *qiling*, organisations should also consider the negative influences of reward and promotion on employee behaviou r. Although reward and promotion are key motivation approaches to improve employee performance and productivity, this study sheds light the dark sides of these motivation approaches, such as motivating excessive internal competition and *qiling*. This prompts organisations to consider balancing the positive and negative influences of motivation approaches on employee behaviour and pay more attention to developing a coping strategy for both organisations and employees to prevent *qiling*.

7.4.3 Implications for practitioners

This study provides practical implications for practitioners in China who are responsible for dealing with *qiling* at work, including human resources (HR) professionals, occupational health and safety (OHS) professionals, and labour lawyers and unions. When dealing with the issue of *qiling*, practitioners in China can only use the dominant understanding of workplace bullying developed by European countries. According to the findings of this study, although there are

significant similarities between *qiling* and bullying, they still have certain differences in behaviour and definitional features. This study contributes to a clear and comprehensive explanation of *qiling* for practitioners in China to better understand this issue. Therefore, the practitioners can further develop supportive mechanisms and reporting channels in order to provide support for victims of *qiling*.

7.4.4 Implications for researchers

This study provides implications for researchers conducting bullying studies in the international and Chinese contexts.

7.5.4.1 Implications for researchers conducting bullying studies in global

This study provides implications for researchers conducting bullying studies in global contexts. The findings of this study grounded from the *qiling* experiences of employees in a Chinese context (i.e., Shenzhen) support the argument that the role of context can influence the perceptions of workplace bullying. This study recognises that using the dominant definition of workplace bullying is valuable to explore the concept in different countries; however, the dominant definition cannot fully cover the understanding of the concept in various countries due to contextual differences, for example, cultural and socioeconomic differences. In line with the bullying studies conducted in Asian countries, such as South Korea and Malaysia, the findings of this study provide further evidence from the Chinese context for the importance of contextual framing of workplace bullying in China and across different countries.

This study suggests researchers conducting qualitative and quantitative bullying studies in various contexts should consider the possible influences of contextual factors on the perception of bullying when directly using the dominant definition of workplace bullying. For qualitative studies, using the dominant understanding is worthwhile to further develop the concept for a particular context. However, this may cause preconceived bias among participants when exploring their own perception about the concept. This means that participants tend to form opinions or judgments based on initial information or impressions, which may be biased or influenced by pre-existing beliefs or stereotypes. The methodology used in this study sheds light the important role of language and participants' own perceptions in conceptualising a concept (e.g., *qiling*). This provides new insight for qualitative researchers to conceptualise workplace bullying in different contexts and reduce the potential preconceived bias of directly using the dominant definition for data collection.

In regard to quantitative bullying studies, this study provides advice in using measurement scales for bullying in different contexts. Previous studies have widely examined that the primary measurement scales of bullying, including NAQ-R and SNAQ, have a high level of statistical validity and reliability in various countries (Makarem et al., 2018; Nam et al., 2010; Rai & Agarwal, 2017b). However, the items in these measurement scales cannot well cover bullying behaviours in some contexts as existing literature founds that bullying behaviour unique in the contexts (e.g., Malaysia) due to the influence of culture are not included in the scales (Kwan et al., 2020). Similarly, by exploring the experiences of employees in Shenzhen, China, this study also identified several behaviours that are not included in the primary measurement scale. Therefore, quantitative researchers should consider the contextual differences in measuring workplace bullying. For example, adopting a measurement scale developed from the research context is valuable to better measure the prevalence of workplace bullying and examine the relationship between bullying and other concept. This also motivates researchers to develop measurement scales for workplace bullying in various contexts by considering contextual differences.

7.4.4.2 Implications for researchers conducting *qiling* studies in China

This study provides practical implications for researchers conducting *qiling* studies in the Chinese context. According to the literature review on the topic of workplace bullying in China, the majority of the studies used the dominant understanding of workplace bullying developed in European countries to address research purposes, for example, examining relationships between bullying and other concepts (Liu et al., 2020; McCormack et al., 2006; McCormack et al., 2009; Sims & Sun, 2012). This study acknowledges the valuable contributions of these studies conducted in China on examining the individual antecedents and consequences of bullying. However, the role of Chinese language and culture in the perception of bullying has not been explored in China. By acknowledging the role of Chinese language in understanding a phenomenon, this study used the Chinese term *qiling* as a starting point to explore employees' experiences in a Chinese context rather than directly using the dominant definition of bullying. The findings of this study shed light on the similarities and differences between *qiling* and bullying on their academic definitions. This suggests that bullying researchers should consider using the concept of *qilin*g when conducting research in the Chinese context rather than directly using the dominant understanding of bullying. Particularly, this study encourages that researchers conduct qualitative studies in other regions of China to further develop the concept

and behaviours of *qilin*g. In addition, the behaviours of *qilin*g identified in this study can be used to develop a measurement scale for *qilin*g in China.

This study also sheds light the development of *qilin*g in a Chinese context (i.e., Shenzhen) for researchers to explore preventions and intervention strategies in the Chinese workplace. Specifically, the findings of the study identified important organisational antecedents of *qiling*. Researchers can utilise the findings to explore effective organisational strategies to prevent and intervene in *qilin*g at work. In addition, it is also worthwhile to conduct research to explore how managers in Chinese organisations perceive employees' opinions about the nature and development of *qilin*g.

7.5 Limitations and future research

Although a number of theoretical and practical contributions have been provided, this study has three main limitations that potentially influence the quality of the study findings. Accordingly, this study provides suggestions for future research in order to address the limitations and further develop a better understanding relating to the nature and development of *qiling* in the Chinese context. First, given that targets of *qiling* in China are more likely to be employees due to the influence of Chinese culture and situational factors (as explained in section 3.2), this study only explored the nature and development of *qiling* from an employee's perspective. However, experiences and perception from other hierarchical positions are also valuable to contribute to knowledge regarding *qiling*. Therefore, this study suggests future research to explore the understanding of *qiling* from the perspective of the management level, such as line or senior managers. In addition, it is also worthwhile to explore the understanding of *qiling* from the perspective of practitioners, including HR and OHS professionals. This can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of *qiling* in the Chinese workplace.

Second, this study only collects data from employees working in Shenzhen. Given China is a large country with diverse regional culture, the findings of this study may not be applicable in other regions of China. However, this study provides initial evidence of *qiling*, and future research can continue to explore and examine its nature and development in various regions of the country. In addition, the sample of this study included employees from both private and state-owned companies, as guided by theoretical sampling. However, the data analysis did not indicate that theoretically sampling employees from particular industries was necessary. Furthermore, the aim of qualitative research employing the constructivist grounded theory

approach is not to generalise findings based on a large, representative sample (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). Instead, this study endeavoured to formulate a theory aimed at offering additional insights and a more profound understanding of bullying from the perspective of employees in Shenzhen. While there was a sufficient level of abstraction of key concepts and ample data analysis to attain an initial level of theoretical saturation, future research could scrutinise the findings with different participant groups.

The final potential limitation is that the researcher is a novice grounded theorist, this is his first time to conduct qualitative research. While undertaking the research, the researcher has attempted to learn relevant skills and knowledge in grounded theory and carefully followed the guideline of the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). In addition, the researcher has also obtained valuable peer support from the Healthy Work Group, scholars in the School of Management, and the Ethics committee as well as his PhD colleagues. Most importantly, the constant encouragement from his supervisors motivates the researcher to overcome various challenges and difficulties relating to the constructivist grounded theory research design. Thus, embarking on grounded theory research for the first time does not hinder the researcher from conducting a rigorous study.

7.6 Summary

Workplace bullying becomes one of the most serious and pervasive issues that negatively affect employee health and wellbeing. Previous studies conducted in European countries have contributed to a dominant understanding of this concept. Recent literature has continued to explore the influence of contextual differences in the perception of workplace bullying. The context of China is very different from European countries where most dominant bullying research has been conducted to date. Given the lack of bullying research focusing on the Chinese context, exploring how Chinese employees experience bullying will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the concept to prevent and intervene in bullying in the Chinese workplace as well as globally. *Qiling* is the Chinese term with a long history which has been literarily used as the equivalent term for bullying. Therefore, this study aims to explore the nature and development of workplace *qiling* from an employee's perspective in a Chinese context (i.e., Shenzhen).

The findings of this study proposed that there are certain similarities and differences between *qiling* (in the Chinese context) and bullying (in the European context). This study provides both

theoretical and practical insight into *qiling* in the Chinese context equivalent to bullying. It also provides further evidence for the importance of contextual framing of workplace bullying in China and across different countries. From the perspective of the researcher, I hope the research findings can help the Chinese government, organisations, practitioners and researchers to obtain a comprehensive understanding of *qiling*, in order to further develop prevention and intention strategies for reducing *qiling* at work. More importantly, I hope this study can protect employees in China from *qiling* by expressing their own experiences.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Definitions of relevant concepts of workplace bullying

Author(s)	Term	Definition
Brodsky (1976)	Harassment	Repeated and persistent attempts by one person to torment, wear down, frustrate. It is treatment that persistently provokes, pressures, frightens, intimidates, or otherwise discomforts another person.
Thylefors (1987)	Scapegoating	One or more persons during a period of time are exposed to negative and repeated actions from one or more other persons.
Leymann (1990)	Mobbing	Involves hostile and unethical communication, which is directed in a systematic way by one or few individuals mainly towards one individual who, due to mobbing, is pushed in a helpless and defenceless position, being held there by means of continuing mobbing activities. These actions occur on a very frequent basis (i.e. at least once a week) and over a long period of time (i.e. at least six months).
Wilson (1991)	Workplace trauma	The disintegration of an employee's fundamental self, resulting from an employer's or a supervisor's perceived or real continual and deliberate malicious treatment.
Björkqvist, Österman, and Hjelt-Bäck (1994)	Workplace harassment	Repeated activities, with the aim of bringing mental (but sometimes also physical) pain and directed towards one or more individuals who, for one reason or another, are not able to defend themselves.
Keashly, Trott, and MacLean (1994) ; Agervold (2002)	Abusive behaviour or emotional abuse	Hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviours that are not tied to sexual or racial content, directed by one or more persons towards another that are aimed at abuse undermining the other to ensure compliance from others.
Einarsen and Skogstad (1996)	Bullying	To label something bullying it has to occur repeatedly over a period of time, and the person confronted has to have difficulties defending himself/herself. It is not bullying if two parties of approximately equal n conflict or the incident is an isolated event.

O'Moore et al. (1998)	Bullying	Bullying is a destructive behaviour. It is repeated verbal, psychological and physical acts conducted by an individual or group against others. Isolated incidents of aggressive behaviour, while not to be tolerated, should not be described as bullying. Only inappropriate aggressive behaviour that is systematic and enjoyed is regarded as bullying.
Zapf (1999)	Mobbing	Mobbing at work means harassing, bullying, offending, socially excluding someone or assigning offending work tasks to someone in the course of which the person confronted ends up helpless.
Hoel and Cooper (2000)	Bullying	A situation where one or several individuals persistently, over a period of time, perceive to be on the receiving end of negative actions from one or several persons, in a situation where a target of bullying has difficulty in defending him/ herself against these actions. We will not refer to one set-off incidents as bullying.
Salin (2001)	Bullying	Repeated and persistent negative acts that are directed towards one or several individuals, and which create a hostile work environment. In bullying the targeted person has difficulties in defending herself; it is therefore not a conflict between parties of equal strength.
Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, and Cooper (2003)	Mobbing	Harassment, offending, socially excluding or negative affecting tasks. It is an escalating process in which the target person is feeling helpless.
Lutgen-Sandvik et al. (2007)	Bullying	A situation where one or several individuals perceive themselves to be on the receiving end of negative actions from one or more persons persistently over a period of time, in a situation where the targets have difficulty defending themselves against these actions. We do not refer to a onetime incident as bullying.

Note. Adapted from Chirilă and Constantin (2013)

Appendix B: Measurement scales relating to workplace bullying

Name of scale and abbreviation	Author, year of publication and country	Items	Response format/time frame	Dimensions/ factors (items)
1. WHS Work Harassment Scale	Björkqvist et al. (1994) UK	24	0 (never)–4 (very often)/6 months	Relational (5) Social manipulation (7)
2. IWES Interpersonal Workplace Events Scale	Keashly et al. (1994) Canada	48	1 (rare)–5 (always)/ 12 months	Positive (18) Abusive (28) Physical abuse (2)
3. LIPT Leymann Inventory of Psychological Terrorization	Leymann (1996) Sweden	45	1 (daily)–5 (never) / 12 months	Communication (11) Social contacts (5) Personal reputation (15) Occupational situation (7) Physical health (7)
4. NAQ Negative Acts Questionnaire	Einarsen and Raknes (1997) Norway	22	1 (never)–5 (daily)/ 6 months	Personal (9) Work related (3) Social exclusion (3) Sexual harassment (4) Others (3)
5. BNGS Baron, Neuman and Geddes's scale	Baron et al. (1999) USA	33	1 (never)–5 (very often)/not specified	Expressions of hostility (15) Obstructionism (10) Overt aggression (8)
6. PVS Perceived Victimization Scale	Aquino and Bradfield (2000) USA	10	1 (never)–5 (more than 20 times)/ 6 months	Indirect victimization (4) Direct victimization (4)
7. GWHQ Generalized Workplace Harassment Questionnaire	Rospenda and Richman (2004) USA	29	1 (never)–3 (more than once)/12 months	Verbal hostility (12) Covert hostility (6) Manipulation (5) Physical hostility (3) Sexual harassment (3)
8. JOS Ölafsson and Jóhannsdóttir's Scale	Jóhannsdóttir and Ólafsson (2004) Iceland	18	1 (never)–5 (a few times per week)/ 12 months	General bullying (11) Work-related bullying (5)
9. IAS-T Indirect Aggression Scale—Target version	Forrest et al. (2005) UK	25	1 (never)–5 (regularly)/12 months	Social exclusion (10) Malicious humour (9) Guilt induction (6)
10. FSS Fox and Stallworth's Scale	Fox and Stallworth (2005) USA	32	1 (never)–5 (extremely often)/ 5 years	General bullying (25) Racial bullying (7)
11. WBQ-BO Workplace Bullying Questionnaire —Bullied by Others	Lee and Brotheridge (2006) Canada	27	1 (not at all)–5 (many times a week)/ 6 months	Belittlement (13) Work undermined (7) Verbal abuse (7)

12. NAQ-R Negative Acts Questionnaire — Revised	Einarsen et al. (2009) UK	22	1 (never)–5 (daily)/ 6 months	Work related (7) Person related (12) Physically intimidating (3)
13. EAPA-T Escala de Abuso Psicológico Aplicado en el Lugar de Trabajo	Escartín et al. (2010) Spain	12	0 (never)–4 (daily)/ 6 months	Emotional abuse (3) Professional discredit (3) Professional devaluation (3) Control/ manipulation work context (3)
14. EAPA-T-R Escala de Abuso Psicológico Aplicado en el Lugar de Trabajo Revised	Escartín et al. (2017) Spain	4	0 (never)–4 (daily)/ 6 months	One dimensional
15. SNAQ Short Negative Acts Questionnaire	Escartín et al. (2017) Belgium, Norway and UK	9	1 (never)–4 (weekly or more often)	Quasiunidimensional

Note. Adapted from Escartín et al. (2021)

Appendix C: Participant information sheet (English version)

Exploring the Experience of Workplace *Qiling* (Bullying) in Shenzhen, China

Researcher Introduction

My name is Jishuo Sun, and I am a doctoral researcher in the School of Management at Massey University in New Zealand. My research interest is to explore the understanding of workplace bullying in China from a Chinese employees' perspective. I would greatly appreciate your contribution for this research.

Research Project Description

The main purpose of this study is to understand the nature and development of *qiling* in China from a Chinese employees' perspective. This research aims to contribute to a better understanding of *qiling* in the Chinese workplace for developing prevention and intervention strategies.

Participant Criteria

To ensure that the participants can provide relevant information for this research, I would like to speak to participants who are:

- Chinese employees currently working in Shenzhen for more than one year; AND
- Believe they have either directly or indirectly experienced *qiling* in China at work within the last two years

Project Procedures

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to discuss your understanding and experience of bullying in the interview. The interview is expected to take approximately one hour via an electronic tool Tencent Meeting at your convenience, and will be digitally audio recorded with your permission. If you would like to seek advice in relation to dealing with bullying or other related issues, you are encouraged to contact the following support avenues for guidance.

Kangning Hospital of Shenzhen 24-hour free counselling Phone: 0755-25629459	**Chunyu Doctor** Online telemedicine app Website: https://www.chunyuyisheng.com/
Shenzhen Human Resources and Social Security Bureau Phone: 0755-12333 Website: http://hrss.sz.gov.cn/	

Data Management

The information collected from the interviews will be confidential and only used for the PhD study. Any detailed information that can potentially identify individuals or the organisation they belong will be removed from this study as well as any academic publications developed from the study. At the end of the interview, you will be asked whether you would like to receive a summary of the research findings as well as the interview transcript.

Participant's Rights

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- refuse to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study for up to a week after the interview;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- obtain a summary of the research findings;
- obtain the interview transcript and have the right to edit it.

Project Contacts

If you have any concerns or questions about this project, please contact me or my chief supervisor.

Doctoral Researcher

Jishuo (Jimmy) Sun
Email: J.Sun3@massey.ac.nz
WeChat: sunjishuo
Ph: 13760222650

Chief Supervisor
Dr Darryl Forsyth
Email: D.Forsyth@massey.ac.nz

Appendix D: Participant information sheet (Chinese version)

探索中国深圳职场欺凌的经历

研究人员介绍

我的名字叫孙吉硕，是一名新西兰梅西大学管理学院的一名博士研究员。我的研究兴趣是从中国员工的角度探索对职场欺凌的理解。我十分感谢您为这项研究所做的贡献。

研究项目介绍

这项研究的主要目的是从中国员工的角度了解中国欺凌的本质和发展。这项研究旨在帮助人们更好地了解中国职场中的欺凌行为，从而制定预防和干预策略。

参与者招募条件

为了确保参与者可以提供有关此研究的信息，我想与以下参与者交流：

- 目前在深圳工作超过一年的中国员工；
- 认为过去两年来他们在中国直接或间接地遭受过欺凌

项目流程

如果您同意参加这项研究，将要求您在访谈中讨论您对欺凌的理解和经验。访谈预计将在您方便时通过腾讯会议进行，大约需要一个小时。并且在您允许的情况下，将进行音频录音。如果您想寻求有关欺凌或其他相关问题的建议，建议您联系以下支持途径进行指导。

深圳市康宁医院 24 小时免费咨询 电话：0755-25629459	**春雨医生** 在线远程医疗应用 网址：https://www.chunyuyisheng.com/
深圳市人力资源和社会保障局 电话：0755-12333	

网址：http://hrss.sz.gov.cn/

数据管理

从访谈中收集的信息将是保密的而且仅用于该博士研究。任何可能识别个人或所属组织的详细信息都将从该研究以及该基于该研究的任何学术发表中删除。访谈结束时，您将被询问是否想要接受一份研究结果总结及采访记录。

参与者权利

参与这项研究是完全自愿的。如果您决定参加，您有权：

- 拒绝回答任何特定问题；
- 面试后最多一周退出研究；
- 参与期间随时询问有关研究的任何问题；
- 除非您授权研究人员，否则不会使用您提供的名字；
- 获取一份研究结果总结；
- 获取采访笔录，并有权对其进行编辑。

项目联系方式

如果您对此项目有任何疑问或疑问，请与我或我的主导师联系。

博士研究员

孙吉硕

邮件：J.Sun3@massey.ac.nz

微信：sunjishuo

电话：13760222650

博士生导师

达里尔·福赛斯博士

邮件：D.Forsyth@massey.ac.nz

Appendix E: Consent form (English version)

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF BUSINESS
KAUPAPA WHAI PAKIHI

Exploring the Experience of Workplace *Qiling* (Bullying) in Shenzhen, China

Consent Form

I have read the Participant Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me.

My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree to the interview being sound recorded.

I agree to participate in this study named above.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Full Name (Printed): _____

Appendix F: Consent form (Chinese version)

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF BUSINESS
KAUPAPA WHAI PAKIHI

探索中国深圳职场欺凌的经历

知情同意书

我已经阅读了参与者信息表，并向我解释了研究的细节。

我的问题已经得到满意的答复，并且我了解我可以随时提出其他问题。

我同意对采访进行录音。

我同意参加上述研究。

签名： _____ **日期：** _____

姓名(印刷体)： _____

Appendix G: Participant recruitment advertisement (English version)

Exploring Chinese Employees' Experiences of Workplace Bullying

Participant Recruiment for PhD Research

Do you believe that you have experienced

workplace bullying?

If you have directly or indirectly experienced workplace bullying, I would like to speak with you to know more about your experiences in order to better understand and reduce bullying in the Chinese workplace

Individual information will be kept confidential

This study involves an online interview (approximately 1 hour) using Tencent Meeting at your convenience

If you are interested in participating or have any further concerns, please contact **Jishuo Sun** (doctoral researcher) whose details are provided below.

Phone Number: 13760222650

Email: J.Sun3@massey.ac.nz

WeChat:

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF BUSINESS
KAUPAPA WHAI PAKIHI

Appendix H: Participant recruitment advertisement (Chinese version)

探究中国员工的职场欺凌经历

博士研究项目参与者招募

您是否认为您经历了

职场欺凌?

如果您有直接或间接经历过工作场所欺凌，我想与您交谈以进一步了解您的经历，以便更好地了解和减少中国工作场所的欺凌行为

您的个人信息将被保密

这项研究涉及在方便时使用腾讯会议进行的在线采访（约1小时）

如果您有兴趣参加或有任何其他疑问，请联系孙吉硕（博士研究员），详细联系方式如下。

电话: 13760222650
邮箱: J.Sun3@massey.ac.nz
微信:

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF BUSINESS
KAUPAPA WHAI PAKIHI

Appendix I: Interview guide

Interview Preparation

- Thanks for the voluntary participation.
- Briefly introduce the background of the researcher and the research.
- Explain and clarify the interview process and participant information sheet to make sure that the participants are aware of their rights.
- Ask if there are any questions before starting.
- Start the interview and audio recording.

The Nature of *Qiling*

- In terms of *qiling*, what does this word mean to you in the workplace?
- What type of behaviour do you think is *qiling*?
- Do you think *qiling* in China could be visible or invisible? If yes, could you tell me your experience with that?
- What then wouldn't constitute bullying?
- Have you heard the term *Chuanxiaoxie* (making things hard implicitly)? If yes, could you explain what this term means to you in the workplace?
- How often does _____ happen in your workplace?
- In terms of the frequency of *qiling*, how many times/long do you think it happens to count as *qiling*?
- Do you think power imbalance is an element of *qiling*? If yes, please tell me about your understanding of it?
- What are the effects of *qiling* on you?

The Development of *Qiling*

- Please tell me about your experience with *qiling*?
- What contributed to _____? Any other factors?
- Any other factors are related to your organisation (e.g., leadership, conflicts of interest, organisational culture/atmosphere, etc.)? Do these factors develop *qiling*?
- What happened next?
- Who was involved? When was that? How were they involved?

Probing Questions (Used Throughout)

- I would like to know more about that, please explain.
- Could you please give me an example of _____?
- Could you please elaborate on _____?
- Could you please clarify what you meant about _____?
- What happened next?
- Who is involved with _____ happening?
- When was that?
- How were they involved?
- Is that always the same situation or have you ever experienced it to be different?
- How did you come to know this?
- Please go on _____.
- How did you come to view _____ in this way?
- Do you know other people who may experience that from a different perspective?

Closing Questions

- In your opinion, who is more likely to experience workplace *qiling* (e.g., gender, types of organisations, seniority, etc.)?
- Is there anything you think we should have talked about that we haven't had the opportunity to explore?
- Is there anything you would like to ask me?
- Is there anything else you would like to discuss or share?
- Thanks for your participation.
- Follow-up interview: Could I contact you for a follow-up interview if further clarification is needed?
- Snowballing: Would you be willing to recommend other people you know who may be interested in being interviewed?
- Would you like to receive a summary of the research findings as well as the interview transcript?

Appendix J: Ethics approval

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

Date: 06 October 2020

Dear Jishuo Sun

Re: Ethics Notification - **NOR 20/40 - Exploring the Experience of Workplace Bullying in China**

Thank you for the above application that was considered by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: **Human Ethics Northern Committee** at their meeting held on **Tuesday, 6 October, 2020**.
On behalf of the Committee I am pleased to advise you that the ethics of your application are approved.

Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

Professor Craig Johnson
Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and Director (Research Ethics)

Research Ethics Office, Research and Enterprise
Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North, 4442, New Zealand **T** 06 350 5573; 06 350 5575 **F** 06 355 7973
E humanethics@massey.ac.nz **W** http://humanethics.massey.ac.nz

Appendix K: Participant overview

Number	Industry	Company nature	Working experience	Position	Gender	Age	Experience of *Qiling*	
							Victim	Bystander
1	Banking industry	State-owned company	4 years	Bank teller	Male	34	✓	✓
2	Film industry	State-owned company	1 year	Graphic assistant	Female	32	✓	
3	Banking industry	State-owned company	1 year	IT Technician	Male	27		✓
4	Media industry	Private company	1.5 years	Accountant	Male	28		✓
5	Education industry	Private company	1 year	Teacher	Female	28	✓	
6	Real estate industry	Private company	6 years	Project officer	Female	41	✓	✓
7	Banking industry	State-owned company	1 year	Bank teller	Male	27		✓
8	Accounting industry	Private company	1.5 years	Accountant	Female	30	✓	✓
9	Education industry	Private company	3 years	Learning consultant	Female	28	✓	✓
10	Education industry	Private company	2 years	Politics Teacher	Male	27		✓
11	IT industry	Private company	5 years	IT Technician	Male	28		✓
12	Banking industry	State-owned company	30 years	Business specialist	Female	52	✓	✓
13	Fast-moving consumer goods industry	Private company	6 years	Business specialist	Female	32		✓
14	Internet industry	State-owned company	1 year	IT Technician	Female	24	✓	
15	Internet industry	Private company	5 years	Programmer	Male	28	✓	✓
16	IT industry	State-owned company	3.5 years	Programmer	Male	28		✓
17	Internet industry	Private company	5 years	Project coordinator	Female	27		✓
18	Government	State-owned department	6 years	Auxiliary police	Male	29		✓

19	International business industry	Private company	5 years	Business specialist	Female	27		✓
20	Education industry	State-owned company	12 years	Teacher	Female	37	✓	✓
21	Internet industry	Private company	4 years	Programmer	Female	25	✓	✓
22	Internet industry	Private company	5 years	Programmer	Male	28	✓	✓
23	International business industry	Private company	6 years	Business specialist	Female	29	✓	✓
24	Internet industry	Private company	5 years	IT Technician	Male	28	✓	✓
25	Manufacturing industry	Private company	12 years	Production line worker	Male	33	✓	✓
26	IT industry	Private company	1.5 years	Programmer	Male	28		✓
27	Construction industry	Private company	4 years	Interior designer	Male	27	✓	✓
28	IT industry	Private company	6 years	Programmer	Male	32		✓
29	Construction industry	State-owned company	10 years	Project coordinator	Male	40	✓	✓
30	Accounting industry	Private company	5 years	Accountant	Female	34		✓
31	Internet industry	Private company	1 year	Internship	Female	24	✓	✓
32	Media industry	State-owned company	2 years	Office administrator	Female	26		✓