

Value and Ethical Transformation and Labour  
Activism: Generational Shifts and Prospects for  
Independent Trade Unions in China

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## Abstract

This thesis investigates the evolving ethical orientations among Chinese workers, particularly those born after 1980, and examines how these changes affect the potential for independent trade union formation. While much of the existing literature attributes the weakness of China's labour movement to state repression and institutional constraints, this research introduces ethics as a foundational and underexplored dimension of collective voice. It argues that deeply embedded hierarchical ethics—shaped by Confucian traditions, reinforced during the Maoist era, and maintained through authoritarian governance—have historically impeded union activism by fostering obedience, conformity, and fear of authority.

Drawing on Diefenbach's (2013) general theory of hierarchy and Kohlberg's (1973) moral stage theory, the study develops a cross-sectional ethical framework to analyse workers' attitudes across generational cohorts. Through 62 qualitative interviews, it identifies generational differences in moral reasoning and ethical priorities. The findings reveal that younger participants, particularly those born after the economic reforms, are more inclined toward egalitarian and post-conventional values, demonstrating a greater willingness to support collective action and challenge established power structures. In contrast, older generations tend to reproduce hierarchical ethics and prioritize self-protection, risk aversion, and loyalty to authority.

The thesis argues that although institutional reforms alone may be insufficient to stimulate independent unionism, shifts in ethical values—especially among the younger generation—could play a crucial role in reshaping the future of collective voice in China. It concludes that ethics-oriented resistance, grounded in a rejection of authoritarian norms and a commitment to equality and participation, may serve as a necessary foundation for the development of independent labour organizations in the long term.

Content:

Chapter 1: <u>Introduction</u> .....	2
Chapter 2:	
<u>Literature Review</u>	
<u>introduction</u> .....	11
<u>Literature Review Section One: Collective fighting in the Chinese context</u> .....	17
<u>Literature Review Section Two: Unions’ failures, and their combat strategies</u> .....	39
<u>Literature Review Section Three: Discussion of Hierarchy</u> .....	56
<u>Literature Review Section Four: Ethical change through Chinese context and collective voice opportunity voice opportunities</u> .....	108
Chapter 3: <u>Methodology</u> .....	135
Chapter 4:	
<u>Findings on ethical consideration</u> .....	166
Chapter 5:	
<u>Finding on online</u>	
<u>protest</u> .....	171
Chapter 6: <u>Discussion</u> .....	182
Chapter 7: <u>Conclusion</u> .....	197
Reference.....	200

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 Chapter introduction

Generations born after 1980 in China have shifted their values and ethical considerations, and this indicates a trend to support the establishment of independent trade unions. The research question explores to what extent new generations born after 1980 in China have shifted their values and ethical considerations, and how these shifts can result in the formation of independent unions. This study aims to explore the factors that hindered the establishment of independent trade unions in China, and examines contemporary collective expression through unions, within the Chinese framework.

There are four reasons that indicate the importance of the topic of labour activism in China. First, as China shifted from a planned economy to a market-based system, the transition frequently compromised workers' rights (Chan, 2001). This economic shift has resulted in notable labour disputes, strikes, and the rise of grassroots labour movements. Exploring labour activism is crucial for grasping these developments and the obstacles that workers encounter. Second, China plays a pivotal role in global supply chains. The labour conditions within China can significantly impact international trade policies, corporate responsibility, and worldwide labour standards (Chan, 2001). Thus, examining labour activism is essential for promoting improved labour practices on a global scale. Third, labour activism poses a challenge to the established legal and social structures in China, a country where independent unions are generally prohibited and all labour unions are required to be affiliated with the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), an organization under state control (Lee, 2007). Engaging in discussions about this issue can highlight the urgent need for reforms aimed at enhancing the protection of workers' rights. Finally, labour activism is intricately linked to wider human rights concerns, encompassing the right to organize, the right to engage in fair labour practices, and the right to voice grievances without facing retribution (Friedman, 2014).

To investigate these inquiries, I offer a fresh perspective on comprehending union activities and mobilization in China, with a focus on ethical considerations, which can be regarded as a key potential driver that has been under-explored in existing scholarship. The reason I believe that values and ethical considerations are crucial drivers influencing collective voice and labour activism in China stems from the close link between the collective voice of the working class and the hierarchical system in China (Au and Bai, 2010). This prompts the question of how the hierarchical system has been created and maintained? According to the argument of Diefenbach (2013), value and ethical consideration might be the key to answer the question.

In light of the prevailing conditions, which have been shaped by the economic reforms of the 1980s and the relatively more permissive political atmosphere during the Hu-Wen administration from 2002 to 2012, this PhD thesis investigation posits that the post-1980s generation represents a shift toward anti-hierarchical ethics that champion collective expression and suggests a growing inclination towards the formation of independent trade unions.

The thesis is divided into six chapters, including the introduction. It includes an introduction; literature review; methodology; findings; discussion; and a conclusion. The literature review chapter is separated into four sections comprising section one: The collective fighting in the Chinese context; section two: Unions' failure and their combat strategies; section three: hierarchical theories and discussion; and section four: Ethical change through Chinese context and collective voice opportunities.

### 1.2 Literature review

In the first section of this literature review, I examine the history of the labour movement in various time periods within China, as well as endeavours made by the working class during these periods to

achieve collective representation and the formation of autonomous labour unions, all within the context of the political constraints imposed by the Chinese government. My aim is to identify the principal obstacles that have hindered collective actions and the establishment of independent labour unions. From this section, I conclude that the main obstacle preventing the development of the union form of collective expression stems from the absence of endorsement from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Gallagher, 2005) and the only endorsed official union the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) can only function as a 'transmission belt' or conduit that connects the labour force with the Party-State by conveying CCP's orders to workers and transmitting workers' opinions up to the Party-State level (Clarke and Pringle, 2009; Feng, 2010; Li, 2008; Liu, 2007; Pringle, 2011; Taylor and Li, 2007).

Put differently, if there were no overarching authority dictating the course of union-related activities, the working class might generate an alternative narrative for collective representation, spurred by a rise in labour disputes (Ping, 1990; Cheng and Selden, 1994; Zhang, 2001; Fan, 2002; Gallagher, 2002; Pun, 2005; Lee, 2007; Hurst, 2009; Feng, 2010; Chen, 2010; Au and Bai, 2010; Friedman and Lee, 2010; Feng, 2010; Zheng, 2010; Nichols and Zhao, 2010; Pringle, 2011; Xu, 2013; Ngal, 2013; Friedman, 2014; Lyddon, Cao, Meng, and Lu, 2015; Minzner, 2018; Shi, 2019; Hui, 2020). To predict the other possibility without dictatorship in China, it is reasonable to review trade unions in the West, where political control is different from the type of control in China, and it is argued, occurs outside of dictatorship.

For the second section of literature review, theories pertinent to labour unions in Western contexts are outlined, encompassing the concepts of partnership? (Guest and Peccei's, 2001; Harrison et al., 2011) and organizing (Wills and Simms, 2004; McBride and Greenwood, 2009). It will also delve into the state of labour unions in the West and address the limited influence they often have (Boxall et al., 2007; Gollan, 2009; Smith, 2012; Hall and Purcell, 2012; Wanrooy et al., 2013; Johnstone, 2015; Simms, 2015; Darvas, Gotti, and Sekut, 2023). The central theme of this discussion will revolve around the concept of 'capital disconnection' (Thompson, 2003; 2011) as a shared challenge experienced by Western labour unions. Unlike the situation in China, where the presence of political parties or government doesn't obstruct the existence of trade unions within a free market society, Western labour unions grapple with analogous predicaments, finding themselves in a position of weakness within a capital-dominated hierarchy (Heery, 2002; Thompson, 2003; 2011; Kelly, 2004; Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005; Danford et al., 2005; Epstein, 2005; Kochan, 2007; Upchurch et al., 2008; Palley, 2008; Lapavistas, 2013; Weeks, 2014; Simms, 2015).

Scholars associated with the Frankfurt School, influenced by Marx, emphasize that the acceptance of hierarchy is a culturally ingrained issue shaped by institutions (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972; Adorno, 1993). In order to maintain the supremacy of capital, a prevailing culture has emerged that legitimizes and conceals inequalities within capitalist societies. Consequently, this hierarchical structure has been embraced by the public, including even the most marginalized groups (Weber, 1968; Crandall, 1994, 2000; Quinn and Crocker, 1999; Levy, Freitas, and Salovey, 2002; Levy, West, et al., 2006; Ramirez, Levy, Velilla, and Hughes, 2010). The veneration of hierarchy underscores the commonality between China and the Western world in terms of the trajectory of collective expression and action. This similarity refers to the 'capital disconnected' in the west and the political hierarchy in China. 'Capital disconnected' can be explained from arguments regarding capital dominance, be named as 'market rationalism,' which prioritizes short-term financial returns over long-term cooperative relationships (Thompson, 2003; Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005), which imply the intend weakening to unions. It indicates the capital or financially guided hierarchical system in the West. Although the Chinese hierarchy refers to a one-party dictatorship and direct suppression of the working class (Au and Bai, 2010), the West's default expression of a capital-led hierarchical system reflects hierarchical values similar to those of China. Consequently, the rejection of Chinese political authority alone cannot genuinely pave the way for the establishment of independent unions within the Chinese context, as it remains overshadowed by the dominance of the hierarchical concept. In this sense, to have a profound understanding of the hierarchical concept is necessary for this research.

In the third section, I will initiate a dialogue concerning the fundamental aspects of the hierarchical system, aiming to unveil the reasons for its profound entrenchment and how it might function within the Chinese setting. In order to gain a thorough understanding of hierarchy, I will introduce Diefenbach's extensive hierarchical theory from 2013, as well as other relevant social structure theories put forth by Giddens in 1984 and the social dominance theory proposed by Sidanius in 2004. Through these theories, I can conclude that values and ethical considerations serve as the cornerstone that reinforces the hierarchical system while also being the pivotal factor in constraining it (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Kohlberg, 1973; Laurent, 1978; Brookfield, 2005; O'Brien, 2005; Diefenbach, 2013; He and Su, 2018). I utilize Kohlberg's theory of moral development from 1973 to identify three ethical principles that drive union activities as expressions of social engagement.

Given that the concept of collective action through unions is based on Western ethical principles, given its literature base and cultural context, its relevance is not immediately apparent nor adaptable to the Chinese context. To achieve this adaptation, it is crucial to look at the concept of class. It is reasoned that the Chinese working class share similar ethical principles as fundamental prerequisites in a Marxist tradition of recognising class consciousness. As a result, the exploration of ethics and values in the context of collective expression among the Chinese working class is a substantial and worthwhile endeavour.

In the fourth section, I explore the Chinese Cultural Revolution (Lu, 2008), economic reforms (Ngok, 2008; Au and Bai, 2010), and the era marked as a golden age for the spontaneous empowerment of the working class (Chan and Hui, 2012; Chan, 2013; Xu, 2013; Howell, 2015; Howell and Pringle, 2019; Hui, 2020). I will approach these events through the lenses of ethics and culture to comprehend their impact on the Chinese populace. My analysis will delve into the development of ethical perspectives that sanctioned authoritarianism and investigate the factors that may challenge this perspective from an ethical standpoint. Furthermore, I will extend my discussion to include the revitalization of labour laws and the establishment of Labour Non-Government-Owned Organizations (LNGOs), which, to some extent, serve a role akin to that of labour unions. The more egalitarian ethical principles and values promoted by the economic reform, coupled with the endeavours of the working class, pose a threat to the hierarchical legitimacy within Chinese society (Bian, 1994; Lin, Cai, and Li, 1996; Yueh, 2004; Zhu, 2004; Cai, Park, and Zhao, 2008; Sung, Lifei, and Yanping, 2011). I can reasonably speculate that newer generations of the working class, born after the economic reform, embrace more anti-hierarchical ethical principles compared to their predecessors in the Chinese context (Ralston et al., 1999; Martinsons and Ma, 2009; Barboza, 2010; Pringle, 2011; Chan, 2011; Chan, 2012; Wang and Wang, 2017). This shift legitimizes the pursuit of collective expression and action.

### 1.3 Methodology

The methodology chapter centres on the exploration of the research methodology and my approach to data collection. The study employs a qualitative research design and methods for data collection and analysis techniques to answer the research question. The research question explores to what extent new generations born after 1980 in China have shifted their values and ethical considerations, and how these shifts have resulted in the formation of independent unions. These unions, which were held by previous generations which I argue prevented union activities, based on Western definitions. However, there is more evidence of the swell of worker resistance after reforms and changing values from younger generations. The subsequent segment, which emphasizes qualitative data, presents reporting on 62 interviews which I carried out in 2021, to offer a more vivid and detailed depiction of union activities amongst the working class in China. In essence, my methodology hinges on a Cross-Sectional design, which enables comparisons between generational groups.

The chosen research design is particularly well-matched for this study due to my research question, which are: Are there any transformations in ethics through older to younger generations in the Chinese

working class? What do transformations in generational ethics mean for union formation and collective voice? To identify this change and understand the means of it, the previous ethical theories has been developed in this thesis, originally rooted in Hofstede's cultural dimension theory (1980), and Kohlberg's moral development theory (1973), which also recommended by Diefenbach (2013), offer theoretical underpinning for my data analysis. Additionally, the research incorporates interviews to inspire and anticipate the future shape of collective expression within the Chinese context. As outlined by Diefenbach in 2013, ethical considerations consistently play a substantial role in shaping and perpetuating social systems. Even though this thesis focuses on union activities in the Chinese context, it can still serve as a valuable reference for other studies exploring ethics in various sociological domains.

#### 1.4 Findings

For the finding chapter, I centre attention on the research outcomes derived from the methodology I have detailed. This chapter is segmented into two distinct sections. The initial segment delves into the discoveries related to ethical considerations, primarily drawn from 62 cross-sectional interviews. The subsequent section, extending from the first, zeroes in on the findings concerning the strategic preferences of individuals who are potential proponents of collective union activities and who align with the pro-collective bargaining ethical principles, as determined through interviews. This part also furnishes a detailed examination of the participants' perspectives regarding online protests.

To have a better analysis on result of interpretive cross-sectional interviews, I have created a moral stage framework to categorize participants according to the essential ethical criteria required for collective union activities. These moral stages are categorized into five, encompassing stage 0, stage 1, stage 2, stage 3, and stage 4. This division of moral stages aligns with the theory of ethical considerations developed in this thesis, primarily derived from Kohlberg's moral development theory of 1973. The ethical considerations theory recognizes three pivotal ethical aspects that are essential for engaging in collective union activities, namely:

1. Overcoming the Fear of Authority or Superiors
2. Abandoning the Self-Service Principle
3. Pursuing Equality through Consensus Negotiation

To engage in practical collective union activities, individuals must possess at least the first two ethical considerations.

In this study, stage 0 signifies individuals who lack any of the ethical considerations.

Stage 1 encompasses individuals who have not attained the first ethical consideration but exhibit other ethical considerations.

Stage 2 includes those individuals who have either achieved the first ethical consideration or also endorse the third one.

People at stage 3 signify that they possess both the first and second ethical considerations, rendering them potential supporters for collective union activities.

Those at stage 4 indicate that they embody all three ethical considerations and have the potential to become leaders or crucial members in collective initiatives.

According to this chapter, I can conclude three results based on the first section from positivist cross-sectional questionnaires:

1. In this research, 40% of people achieve stages 3 and 4 for both generational groups, potentially supporting collective unionized activities with 60% of participants who support hierarchical principles, reflecting the underlying difficulty in organizing collective actions in the Chinese context.

2. Among those born after 1980, 44% are against hierarchy and hold ethical considerations for collective voice and actions, while in the older generational group, 35% of people are against hierarchy.

This result indicates that the new generations born after 1980 are shifting their values and ethical considerations from previous generations that support the hierarchical system, thus promoting union activities based on Western definitions.

3. The most noticeable difference between the two generational groups is the number of members in stage 0. In the younger generational group, there is only one person compared to 5 people in the older generational group. This difference further supports the second result of this research.

For the second section of this chapter, I rank people's preferences in stage 3 and 4, as they are more receptive to collective actions based on their ethical values for different forms of collective action for voicing their concerns including strike, third-party invited negotiation, online protest, and self-revenge. As anticipated, the majority of participants prioritized third-party-invited negotiation. A generational contrast reveals that none of the individuals in the older cohort identified strike action as their initial preference. This can be rationalized by their deep comprehension of the Chinese context, where any type of impromptu strike is against the law. Additionally, it may stem from their hesitancy to involve themselves in direct confrontations with their superiors or challenge the entire hierarchical system.

Our research also specifically focuses on participants opinion on online protest. According to the results, most participants did not respond positively to online protests. Nearly 40% of them consider online protests to be immoral behaviour. The further discussion of this will be explored in the next part, along with other issues reflected in these interviews.

## 1.5 Discussion

In the discussion chapter, I commence by contextualizing social media in an authoritarian regime like China. The discussion of social media in this thesis is necessary because it plays an increasingly significant role in shaping labour activism, worker resistance, and union-building efforts. Nowadays, social media has transformed labour movements by providing workers with new tools for organization and resistance, particularly in contexts where traditional union structures are weak or repressed (Lee, 2016). Another scholar Qui (2017) highlights how digital platforms have enabled workers to share grievances, coordinate strikes, and mobilize collective action beyond traditional union channels. Research conducted in China from Chan (2014) highlights the critical role of social media in amplifying worker voices and enhancing public awareness of labor struggles, particularly in a context where independent unions face significant restrictions. While prior research has highlighted the potential of social media to challenge authoritarian governments, my findings on workers' perspectives regarding online protests did not yield positive results. My research indicates that Chinese workers generally distrust online protests, with nearly 40% perceiving them as immoral, and many favoring direct actions such as face-to-face negotiations or legal channels to resolve disputes. This skepticism is shaped by strict government censorship, fear of legal repercussions, and cultural values that prioritize social harmony while discouraging public confrontation. Additionally, workers express concerns that online protests lack effectiveness without organizational backing and could result in reputational harm for both individuals and their employers. While social media reduces the cost of mobilization and facilitates information dissemination, the authoritarian surveillance environment in China complicates its viability as a tool for collective action. In the Chinese context, a substantial portion of content censorship occurs retroactively, exemplified by projects such as the Golden Shield (GS). Conventional wisdom, especially among Western scholars in the realm of social media research, suggests that stringent censorship of social media should not be welcomed by citizens due to concerns about personal data protection and potential threats to information security (Potoglou et al., 2017). However, research in the Chinese context reveals that most Chinese citizens actually welcome various forms of government surveillance. Why is this the case? Su, Xu, and Cao's (2021) research suggests that this phenomenon is driven by a deep concern for social stability and a willingness to sacrifice certain personal freedoms in exchange for a sense of security. The blockade of information and limited experience in spontaneously engaging in politically related social activities make it challenging for Chinese citizens to disentangle social stability from the current authoritarian

regime. They believe that the role of the existing political authority is crucial and necessary to uphold social stability. This phenomenon connects to an epistemological debate between rationalism and empiricism.

This thesis employs epistemological frameworks to analyze Chinese citizens' attitudes toward government surveillance and their reluctance to participate in online activism, with particular focus on the debate between rationalism and empiricism. This analytical framework allows the research to move beyond surface-level explanations of censorship and repression, instead demonstrating how deep-seated epistemological traditions shape political behaviour.

The fundamental disagreement between rationalism and empiricism lies in how they perceive knowledge acquisition (Mutiani, Disman, Wiyanarti, Abbas, Hadi, Subiyakto, 2022). Rationalists assert that knowledge derived from reason is absolute and universal, whereas empiricists argue that knowledge rooted in sensory experiences is contingent and subject to revision. Building on this, they form contrasting views on the relationship between individuals and the social structure. Rationalism, based on internal reasoning and logical deduction, may not guarantee complete freedom for individuals in society (Mutiani et.al., 2022; James, 2010; Kattsoff, 2004; Magnis, 2002). Conversely, empiricism, grounded in various experiences as the wellspring of knowledge, promotes the idea that different individuals with diverse experiences can offer distinct perspectives on issues, fostering a more multifaceted problem-solving process and a more democratic social system (Mutiani et.al., 2022; Akhmadi, 2007; Kattsoff, 2004; Honer & Hunt, 2003). Thus, the epistemological debate suggests the rationale behind the Chinese people's acceptance of government surveillance.

The choice of epistemology aligns with distinct cultural tendencies: one rooted in collectivism, exemplified by China, and the other in individualism, exemplified by Western nations. Collectivism places importance on obedience and self-sacrifice for the group, legitimizing social hierarchies between superiors and subordinates (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Oyserman, 1993; Triandis, 1995; Linz, 2000). In contrast, individualism emphasizes personal self-worth and accomplishments, implying a pursuit of freedom, which inherently rejects hierarchical systems that prioritize order and control (Hofstede, 1980; Bellah et al., 1985; Hsu, 1983; Kagitcibasi, 1994; U. Kim, 1994; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Sampson, 1977; Triandis, 1995; Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999; Miller, 1984; Morris & Peng, 1994; Newman, 1993). Consequently, an epistemology grounded in empiricism and a culture rooted in individualism could resolve the moral quandary faced by Chinese citizens and realize the third ethical consideration. This would, in turn, strengthen the potential of spontaneous social activities in China. This phenomenon also offers insight into why the participants in this research express moral concerns regarding online protests.

## 1.6 Chapter conclusion

For the final chapter of conclusion, I summarize the debates mentioned above. For the content below, you will see the details of my debate start with the next chapter of literature review.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### 2.0 Introduction to the Literature Review

Is there evidence of a gradual, nascent shift in values and ethical considerations on the topics of hierarchy, workers' agency and collective voice, across a specific younger generation in China? To address this research question, using primary and secondary works, the literature review covers 2.1) Chinese political economy and collective fight in historical context; 2.2) work and employment publications on collective voice; 2.3) theory of hierarchy; 2.4) theoretical framework; 2.5) value and ethical shift through generations in China.

I engage critically with existing research to substantiate my empirical findings documented in subsequent sections as well as to point out that no research to date has made the precise claims I am making.

#### 2.0.1 Chinese political economy: the history of trade union development

What opportunities and barriers have existed, and now exist, for collective voice and trade union formation in the Chinese context? Chinese institutions have consistently created barriers for the Chinese labour movement. The barriers presented in the first section of this chapter have prevented independent trade unions in China.

Most research on collective voice in the Chinese context highlights the central role played by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in shaping labour relations (Lyddon, Cao, Meng, and Lu, 2015; Wang, 2011; Metcalf and Li, 2007; Chin and Liu, 2014; Bai, 2011; Chin and Liu, 2015; Chang and Brown, 2013; Chang and Qiao, 2009; Feng, 2010; Li, 2008; Pringle, 2011). Building on the argument advanced by Au and Bai (2010), the CCP has historically exercised control over all aspects of the working-class movement—transforming the working class from the 'leading class' during the Mao era to a marginalized group in the present day. Legally, any trade union operating outside the CCP's authority is deemed illegal. Moreover, although labour contract laws were introduced in the early 2000s, they have failed to address the power imbalance between workers and the managerial class, which includes entrepreneurs and other elite groups (Ngok, 2008).

Labour protests and independent unions remained illegal in the wake of economic reforms. Without legal support, any long-term attempt at establishing an independent trade union is destined to fail (Department of Population and Employment Statistics, National Bureau of Statistics, and Department of Planning and Finance, Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, 2023). Therefore, it is evident that the primary barrier to the emergence of collective voice is the lack of support from the CCP. In other words, in the absence of an absolute authority controlling the outcome of union activities, a different narrative for collective voice might emerge from the working class, driven by an increase in labour disputes (Department of Population and Employment Statistics, National Bureau of Statistics, and Department of Planning and Finance, Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, 2023). Nevertheless, the situation of trade unions in the West, where political control is absent as in China, presents a different possibility.

#### 2.0.2 Work and employment publications on collective voice and union

I compare dilemmas faced by the Chinese labour movement to the struggles faced by unions in the Western world for strategic knowledge sharing, with the emphasis on workers' voice. The thesis presents a transnationally informed political project, teasing out potentials and opportunities for collective voice in China. Institutions operate differently transnationally and have had different impacts on labour movements in the West and East. While this is not the primary focus of the PhD, I have presented some of the historical aspects for UK trade unions because lessons learned provide

a valuable resource and aids in my discussion of values and ethics.

According to the argument by Wanrooy et al. (2013), trade unions in the West face challenges, especially in the private sector. Johnstone and Ackers (2015) describe two approaches to union operations for labour activities: organizing and partnership. In the organizing strategy, the core idea is to legislate a contrary relationship between the union and management by expanding their influence to protect themselves from employer exploitation (Simms, 2015). This strategy is based on the belief that worker and manager interests are inherently conflicting (Heery and Simms, 2008), which often provides employers with an excuse to obstruct organizing activities (Heery and Simms, 2010). The outcome is that employer obstruction is highly effective. Research by Bryson and Freeman (2007) reveals that employees hope unions can engage with management in a more cooperative manner to enhance their performance and working conditions. This preference stems from the perception that organizing campaigns can potentially harm their careers (Bry et al., 2006). Additionally, organizing campaigns are costly and time-consuming with uncertain results (Johnstone and Ackers, 2015). Therefore, the organizing strategy is generally unwelcomed by both employees and employers. The alternative strategy is partnership, which involves agreements between competing actors who choose cooperation over adversarial relations. However, its weakness lies in the difficulty of maintaining equal treatment between the two parties within the power imbalance (Danford et al., 2005). Establishing a partnership between trade unions and employers challenges the priority of the employer's interests and is only acceptable when accompanied by tightly defined parameters under employer control (Simms, 2015). Another argument by Thompson (2003) highlights the core reason for partnership failure, namely, 'disconnected capitalism,' in which managers prioritize short-term financial concerns over other considerations.

Thompson's argument (2003, 2011) suggests that, on one hand, maximizing labour productivity is crucial in a competitive business environment, while, on the other hand, corporate decision-making revolves around return on investment in business units. The employment relationship tends to be balanced more heavily toward employer interests than worker welfare. While a win-win scenario between workers and managers, where worker satisfaction relates to productivity, may seem ideal, it is often unrealistic (Thompson, 2003; Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005). This reality highlights the shortcomings of both partnership and organizing strategies. Financialization, which emphasizes short-term interests, has become a dominant value in capitalist societies (Weeks, 2014; Lapavitsas, 2013; Palley, 2008; Epstein, 2005). Organizing cannot expect institutional reform from a legal perspective to strengthen union power, as it challenges the fundamental values of capitalism. Simms (2015) notes that some unions attempt to pursue both strategies simultaneously: partnering with good employers and organizing against bad ones. John Monks (1997) offers a more pragmatic approach: 'partner with good employers and organize against bad ones.' Clearly, partnership and organizing are interdependent. If partnership fails, organizing becomes the only viable option. The failure of both strategies thrusts unions back into a competitive, power-based environment, resembling a game of 'who wields more influence.' Thompson (2011) explains this situation as the result of incorporating the concept of financialization into corporate decision-making strategies. Simms (2015) supports this notion, indicating that this outcome is shaped by the ideas and values of the management group, which prioritize investment returns driven by self-interest, rather than the pursuit of justice guided by empathy legitimizing hierarchical ethics in a capitalist society. According to Kelly (1998), employment relationship conflicts stem from injustice, or at least the perception of injustice. If management decisions do not align with principles of justice guided by empathetic ethics, collective action and voice will remain elusive in the face of 'disconnected capitalism.'

Unlike the Chinese context, the UK lacks a powerful political party that exerts control over every aspect of society. Instead, capital assumes the role of the ultimate authority, guided by self-interest ethics. "The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relations, the dominant material relations grasped as ideas; hence of the relations which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance" (Marx and Engels, 1976: P59). Capitalism has cultivated a culture that encourages self-interest pursuit, defining individuals based on their

possession of capital within a hierarchical system that breeds a new form of authoritarianism distinct from China's political model. To summarize, the differences between China and the West in terms of employment relationships are minimal; the key distinction lies in who wields authority—capital or the party. If unions represent the principle of egalitarianism, their true adversary is not employers or capital held by various shareholders, but rather authoritarianism itself, fuelled by hierarchical ethics and self-interest values.

### 2.0.3 Theory of Hierarchy

Marx and Engels' theory implies that public acceptance of the hierarchical system is a consequence of the political system, with capitalist society fostering capital-based authoritarian ethics. However, Thomas Diefenbach (2013), in his exploration of hierarchy and organization, proposes a more nuanced conclusion: social ethics play a pivotal role in creating and maintaining the political and economic system. Based on his argument, a new system must align with the ethical expectations of the majority, or it risks becoming an empty shell without followers. Numerous examples from Asia and Africa in the last century attest to the failure of democracy when societal ethics do not align with the prevailing system. Returning to the Chinese context, generations of Chinese authorities have promoted and upheld hierarchical ethics within society for an extended period, emphasizing obedience as a significant aspect of Confucianism (Chu, 1977; Fairbank, 1976; Pye, 1968). According to Lu (2008), the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 intensified the value of obedience and hierarchism. China is often categorized as a high-power distance society, indicating a significant fear of authority, as theorized by Hofstede (1980). Another scholar supporting 'moral determinism' is Kohlberg (1973), who proposed the theory of moral development stages. Based on his argument, societies can be classified based on the moral principles collectively embraced by their members. He identifies six moral stages, ranging from low to high. The first stage, labelled the 'punishment-and-obedience orientation society,' is characterized by obedience driven by a desire to avoid punishment from authority figures. The second stage can be referred to as self-interest orientation, where the right action is defined as one that benefits oneself or is mutually advantageous. The third stage is termed social approval-seeking orientation, characterized by moral reasoning that emphasizes conforming to social expectations and seeking approval. The fourth stage, known as law and order orientation, highlights the importance of rules, laws, and maintaining social order. In the subsequent stage, individuals focus on the social contract and individual rights, acknowledging that laws are based on social agreements and can be modified to promote the greater good. Finally, the last stage represents individuals who guide their actions by abstract moral principles, such as justice, equality, and respect for human rights. The lower the moral stage in society, the closer the link to authoritarianism, diverging from the ideals of egalitarianism. In this research, I refine Kohlberg's theory and identify three ethical considerations relevant to collective voice and action:

1. Overcoming the Fear of Authority or Superiors
2. Abandoning the Self-Service Principle
3. Pursuing Equality through Consensus Negotiation

The first ethical consideration corresponds to the first stage of Kohlberg's theory. If participants can overcome their fear of authority or supervisors, it suggests that their ethical reasoning surpasses the first stage, as described by Kohlberg. The second ethical consideration assesses the extent to which participants align with the characteristics of individuals in stage two or stage three of Kohlberg's framework. The third ethical consideration evaluates whether participants have achieved stage five.

This research does not address stage four, known as law and order orientation. Although Kohlberg posited that individuals in stage four possess a higher ethical reasoning level than those in stage three (social approval-seeking orientation) in contexts involving anti-hierarchical behaviour, collective actions or unionized activities are illegal in the Chinese context. Individuals who operate at stage four might hinder the development of unionized actions in China due to their adherence to laws and societal rules. Consequently, this research emphasizes stage five, using it as the basis for the final

ethical consideration to assess participants' ethical reasoning in relation to unionized activities.

The first two considerations are critical for all workers participating in collective union activities, as they pertain to the essential elements of unity and cohesion. Meanwhile, all three considerations are particularly significant for leaders, who must also possess the insight that social order should be grounded in social agreements. Therefore, the key question is whether Chinese workers share these ethical considerations that support collective voice and action. Is there a catalyst capable of reversing the dominance of authoritarian ethics rooted in Confucianism and the Cultural Revolution?

#### 2.0.4 Important events and value shift through generations in China

The Chinese context is shaped by the open-up policy of the 1980s and the relatively loose political environment during the Hu-Wen administration from 2002 to 2012, generations born after 1980 signify a shift towards anti-hierarchical ethics that promote collective voice and provide an opportunity for independent trade unions. People's experiences can gradually reshape their values to align with evolving societal norms (Myers, 2016). This implies that any economic or political changes within society can potentially alter the ethics of individuals influenced by these transformations. Within the Chinese context, the economic reforms and open-up policy initiated in 1978 significantly shifted the social power dynamic of the working class. The era of 'prime civil society' during the Hu-Wen administration, which granted greater space for social organizations, can be considered a trigger for a cultural reversal (Howell and Pringle, 2019: 234). Previous research on generational differences in China provides evidence of this shift (Ralston et al., 1999; Martinsons and Ma, 2009). When studying generations, the subculture theory must be considered first, as it posits that events experienced during one's formative years shape their values (Mannheim, 1970). The open-up policy was fully implemented after 1980, and all subsequent generations have grown up in its shadow. The Hu-Wen period, lasting from 2002 to 2012, saw the generation born in the 1980s enter the workforce, with direct exposure to employment relationships. For those born in the 1990s, they experienced this period during their childhood and adolescence, which other scholars have noted as influential in shaping values (Strauss and Howe, 1991; Inglehart, 1997). This explains why my research sets 1980 as the dividing line for comparing different generations. Ralston et al. (1999) compared values between the 1960s generation and the previous one and found that the 1960s generation displayed higher levels of individualism. They selected the 1960s generation because they had experienced the economic reforms of 1978 during their formative years, suggesting a stronger influence of this event on their values compared to previous generations. Similarly, Martinsons and Ma (2009) used this strategy to identify generational differences and concluded that the younger generation is more concerned with self-interest and majority rights. All these studies focusing on generational differences in China suggest that the events of the open-up policy and economic reform had a significant impact on the younger generation. There is ample research highlighting the changes before and after the economic reform, transitioning from a planned economy to a market-oriented one. According to Garnaut, Cai, and Song (2014), economic reform empowered citizens by encouraging them to pursue their interests for the sake of economic development. However, many scholars argue that this empowerment is actually a response to the loss of social status among the working class, a consequence of political decisions that prioritized attracting foreign investment over labour rights and welfare expenditures (Chan & Peng, 2011). For the first time since 1949, the Chinese working class found themselves without political power, needing to adapt to survive in a competitive environment (Au and Bai, 2010). The evidence of this phenomenon can be seen through the events of Tiananmen Square in 1989 and persistent workers' resistance activities to private sectors since the 90s. Fortunately, the relatively lenient political environment during the Hu-Wen administration allowed for social movements, marking a golden age for collective voice among the working class. As described by Ngok (2008), the employment relationship shifted from one of extreme power imbalance between leaders and subordinates to a more balanced relationship between employers and employees, protected by contracts. This shift suggests a potential change in values, moving from hierarchism to egalitarianism. Therefore, this research will focus on generational differences between those born before and after 1980, arguing that those born after 1980 display a lower acceptance of hierarchical

ethical considerations compared to previous generations, indicating better readiness for the development of collective voice and action to establish independent trade unions in the Chinese context.

The literature review has been divided into four sections to provide a detailed discussion of the aforementioned topics.

### Literature Review Section One: The collective fighting in the Chinese context

#### 2.1.1 Section Introduction:

As the world's second-largest economy with the largest population, China can be regarded as a good case study to assess and analyse the interaction between labour resistance and worker pressure on state-controlled unitary trade unionism. The wave of gradually intensified labour resistance activities started in 2002 and has faced strong political suppression since 2013 under President Xi. Although the bloom of the working-class movement only lasted for ten years during the Hui-Wei administration period, the suppression of labour resistance and political persecution of working-class activists do not signify the end of the working-class social movement. In this section, I will discuss the working-class movement in different periods in the Chinese context and working-class efforts in these periods for collective voice and independent unions under the political suppression of Chinese authority. I will be trying to figure out the key barriers for the collective actions and independent union establishment. First, it is important to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Chinese context, which will be the first step in understanding why it is difficult to build an independent trade union in China. After finishing this section, I will explore the dim future of labour activism and how urgently the researchers need a new angle to find hope for future unionization activities among the Chinese working class. The shift in values and ethical considerations among the Chinese working class could be one source of this hope.

#### 2.1.2 Union activities in the Chinese context

Since the reform and openness policy in 1978, China has experienced rapid development in industrialization and domestic marketization. According to research by Gallagher (2005), to maintain political supremacy within the Party-State system for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), independent trade unions are prohibited. The All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) is the only official department that, to some extent, acts as a trade union (Trade Union Law of China, 2001, Arts. 2 and 4). However, unlike trade unions in the Western world, the ACFTU only functions as a 'transmission belt' or conduit that connects the labour force with the Party-State by conveying CCP's orders to workers and transmitting workers' opinions up to the Party-State level (Clarke and Pringle, 2009; Feng, 2010; Li, 2008; Liu, 2007; Pringle, 2011; Taylor and Li, 2007).

Some scholars believe that the ACFTU's main function is not to completely represent the interests of workers but to mediate conflicts between employers and employees under the control of the CCP (Lyddon, Cao, Meng, and Lu, 2015). According to the argument by Metcalf and Li (2007), the ACFTU consists of three interrelated elements, including democratic centralism, top-down control, and a dual local and industrial structure, with a hierarchical system governing three sub-level unions (provincial, local/city, county, and town, and workplace-based/corporate levels). According to the Trade Union Law in 2001 and the Trade Union constitution in 2003, all workers have the right to join a union, but the union must be approved and supervised by the ACFTU; otherwise, it will be considered illegal (Wang, 2011; Metcalf and Li, 2007). Since union leaders are appointed directly by the CCP rather than elected by the workers, unions are more likely to represent the interests of the government than those of the labour force. According to the argument by Chin and Liu (2014), representing the interests of workers can be considered one of the multiple goals of the ACFTU, but more importantly, it aims to ensure some degree of control and influence over private enterprises, especially foreign-invested companies. This is done to enhance investment incentives and economic growth (Wang,

2011; Bai, 2011). Due to the multifunctional nature of the ACFTU, it becomes challenging to provide the best service to protect the interests of laborers and the interests of the country simultaneously (Wang, 2011). Chinese unions are willing to represent the interests of laborers but only as long as the country's interests are not compromised. The productivity of Chinese enterprises is an important element related to the country's interest (Bai, 2011). As a result, the role of the ACFTU in mediating conflicts between management and labour becomes increasingly complex and is often deemed "useless" by both the government and laborers (Chin and Liu, 2015).

Due to China's participation in the global economy, labour resistance has intensified, necessitating reforms in official trade unionism (Feng, 2010). Although unofficial independent trade unions are completely forbidden in China, the increasing trend of labour resistance activities is not deterred by this prohibition and, in some cases, is even promoted by the immature leadership of independent unions. Based on the argument by Chen (2010, p.122), "Without organization and rules to follow for strikes, the behavioural pattern of worker action can be volatile, undisciplined, and unpredictable." Almost all Chinese labour resistance activities can be described as wildcat activities that are not supported or even opposed by the Chinese government. According to Chen (2010), the ACFTU's unique and ineffective role leads to collective actions being predominantly launched by unorganized workers. However, Chinese workers face challenges in creating or joining independent unions due to their illegality. With the world's largest working-class workforce, China is confronting the challenge of developing collective voice. Additionally, it faces a unique problem that does not occur in other developed industrial economies (Lyddon, Cao, Meng, and Lu, 2015). Statistics show that from 1996 to 2014, the number of labour disputes increased nearly 15 times to 715,163, with 267,165 workers involved in collective disputes (Department of Population and Employment Statistics, National Bureau of Statistics, and Department of Planning and Finance, Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, 2016, p. 344-345). This increase can largely be attributed to Chinese laws that do not grant workers the right to strike. Moreover, the ACFTU has been largely ineffective in representing workers' demands (Chen, 2010; Friedman and Lee, 2010; Pringle, 2011). According to statistics from the China Labor Bulletin (2016), the number of wildcat strikes increased fifteenfold between 2011 and 2015, reaching a total of 2,772 incidents. The demands associated with these strikes ranged from rights-based claims—such as complaints about wage arrears—to more interest-driven objectives, including wage increases and trade union reform (Elfstrom and Kuruvilla, 2014). Consequently, some non-governmental organizations have been established, allowing workers to organize strikes outside of the ACFTU system to protect their rights and interests. Under these circumstances, the function of the ACFTU system has been called into question. According to Wang (2015), the ACFTU system must reform itself or become more responsive to the labour force, or it may be replaced by independent unions. For the Chinese trade union, merely acting as a conduit role between the CCP and Chinese labour forces is insufficient (Chang and Brown, 2013; Chang and Qiao, 2009; Feng, 2010; Li, 2008; Pringle, 2011). However, the majority of attempts to establish or develop a functional western-style trade union in the Chinese context over the past more than 40 years have been identified as failures. Not to mention the great suppression from President Xi since 2013, which end the golden age of working-class movement and independent union activities in Hui-Wei administration (Minzner. 2018). Chinese President Xi Jinping had implemented a range of policies and measures aimed at consolidating the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) control over society and maintaining social stability. These policies included increased censorship and control over the media and the internet, a crackdown on civil society organizations and human rights activists, and a tightening of ideological and political education in schools and universities. These make any recent data on Chinese collective actions very hard to find. Comparing to the previous Hui-Wei period which provide certain level of freedom to the establishment of non-government-own organization to collectively protect workers right, Xi Jinping's leadership has been characterized by a more assertive and centralized approach to governance, often referred to as "Xi Jinping Thought." His administration has shown a stronger willingness to repress dissent and collective action that it views as a potential challenge to the CCP's authority. This has resulted in increased efforts to suppress various forms of dissent, including crackdowns on human rights lawyers, religious groups, and ethnic minority populations. Under these circumstances, there are little room for independent union in China to take a breath. In this sense,

does it mean there are no hope for independent union and collective voice in the future? The answer of that may not that easy. Therefore, understanding the details of past labour resistance activities is necessary.

Due to the contingent nature of the Chinese context over the past 40 years, the attitudes of different roles have varied based on the changing situation. Therefore, it is meaningful to focus on the big picture of labour mobilization events to anticipate the future of independent union. This chapter aims to answer questions: What economic background and social elements have caused the consequences of "union's failure" in different times in the Chinese context? What are the challenges for independent workers' representation in the context of the official union-Party nexus?

To understand the background of the Chinese context, I cannot ignore the trigger that led to the beginning of labour resistance, which is the open-up policy and economic reform that happened in 1978. Based on the argument by Au and Bai (2010), the labour resistance issue has gradually become a popular topic of discussion since the end of the Mao period in China. The working class changed from the leading class in society to a powerless group following the "open-up policy and economic reform" after the 1970s. In this stage, the entrepreneur class took a leading position, and the interests of the working class were sacrificed for economic growth (Au and Bai, 2010). According to the theory of mobilization (Kelly, 1998), there are certain psychological/organizational stages before physical collective action by labour, including recognizing injustice; identifying leadership; and taking action. The key point of this process is the individual perception of injustice, which determines what is considered "wrong" or "illegitimate." As this process unfolds, individual perceptions transform into collective grievances with qualified leadership, leading to collective action. The labour resistance activities emerged due to this perception of injustice. The working class in this period viewed the actions of economic reform as unjust and felt betrayed by the country as they were sacrificed in the Chinese new era (Au and Bai, 2010). From the resistance event in 1989, which targeted government corruption, to the activities against privatization, and then to the fight for labour rights and wages, the issue of injustice has consistently served as the triggering factor for labour resistance activities. However, the new vested interest class, the entrepreneurs, remained stable with support from the CCP and the government to enhance economic growth. Meanwhile, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, Although the problem of wildcat strikes has become increasingly serious, the function of trade unions and labour collective voice has largely been ignored by the government, as it is seen as less important than GDP growth. The sacrifice made by the working class has contributed to productivity gains and economic growth for Chinese society without corresponding wage inflation (Garnaut, Fang, and Song, 2014). It has also helped China achieve high levels of foreign exchange through cheap production for export and access to foreign technology. China has become the "world factory" with cheap labour. Therefore, it is important to discuss how the Chinese working class perceives and reacts to their sacrifice. It is necessary to examine the specific circumstances of past labour resistance activities since the Chinese economic reforms began. This analysis should include the requests made by the working class and the strategies employed by labour leaders. Are these strategies effective? What insights can be gained? These questions will also be explored in the next parts. But first, I need to understand how the collective labour resistance begin through Chinese history.

#### 2.1.2.1 Labour Resistance Activity from the Mao to Deng Period

The authoritarianism of the one-party state always plays an important role in all periods of leadership under the Chinese Communist Party. However, the differences between the post-Mao and Deng periods are still significant, which, to a large extent, influence or even promote today's labour resistance activities. In the post-Mao period, workers were more privileged compared to the Deng period or even today. They enjoyed the right to employment, social security, and a higher living standard. In this period, workers were identified as the 'leading class'. This title provided additional benefits and helped them achieve privileged social status. For example, in political movements such as the Cultural Revolution, they were the least vulnerable to repression. Even in marriage, they were

identified as an advantaged group (Au and Bai, 2010). However, similar to today, workers did not have real power in the workplace or at the national level. Although they had a high level of job security and could not be fired by managers, they did not have any power to voice their opinions or make decisions themselves. Workers stayed and worked in their workplace for a lifetime and were accustomed to being told to follow the lead from the upper class without questioning (Au and Bai, 2010). From the perspective of workers in this period, they were the creators of all the industrial wealth in society. They sustained state-owned collective property at the plant level through their sweat and tears (Au and Bai, 2010). In summary, workers can be regarded as the least discontented class in the Mao period. This phenomenon led to the absence of significant labour struggles during this period. Only some small-scale economic strikes happened in the first few years after 1949 (the founding of the People's Republic of China). Even during the Cultural Revolution period, labour activities rarely reached an important level. Workers were still an invulnerable group. However, after the reform and opening-up policy in China, labour discontent emerged due to the capitalist market reform, which eroded their economic benefits. From the perspective of workers, they felt betrayed by the country (believing they were the creators of all industrial wealth, but their status had been challenged). This period is often identified as the Deng period. This accumulated discontent reached its climax during the 1989 democracy movement. This event ended with state violence and led to even heavier oppression of workers. However, labour resistance activities did not end at this stage. Even with harsh repression, the number of labour resistance activities continued to increase year by year.

#### 2.1.2.2 Working-Class Movement Before 1989 in the Deng Period

The year 1979 could be regarded as a turning point for the Chinese working class. In this year, Deng Xiaoping rose to power and began implementing market reforms and opening-up policies in China. Deng's first step was to shift the social base of the CCP from workers to newly emerging entrepreneurs. The most obvious change can be found in the new law of 1982, where the constitutional right to strike was abolished for workers. Instead, revisions to the constitution were introduced to support private enterprises and properties. After the agreement between China and the UK to preserve Hong Kong's laissez-faire capitalism for fifty years, Deng indicated that the nation should learn from Hong Kong's commercial skills but not their ideas on civil liberties (Au and Bai, 2010). In 1987, Deng told an African delegation not to follow socialism but to focus only on economic growth (Dao Daozheng, 2008). Because of these business reforms, the power of the entrepreneur class increased, but the special privileges for workers were gradually removed. According to research by Au and Bai (2010), the intensity of work increased with greater income inequality. Due to the rush of market reform, inflation occurred along with bureaucracy corruption. Based on research by Meisner (1996), bureaucracy corruption was a result of price reforms, which included two pricing systems: 'planned price' and 'market prices'. Some officials had the privilege to buy valuable products at lower 'planned prices' and then resell them at higher 'market prices'. Bureaucrats began turning into capitalists because of this phenomenon. This indecent behaviour from bureaucrats finally enraged the people, especially workers whose interests had been largely undermined because of the business reform, leading to the democracy movement in 1989.

Although the market reform directly led to labour resistance, these reforms were still necessary for industrial development. Before the market reform and opening-up policy in China, the 'planned economy' played a crucial role in the Chinese context. The concept of the market and liberal economy was largely rejected by the government, and there were no privately-owned organizations in China. All means of production referred to public ownership, meaning they were all state-owned organizations. This phenomenon led to the deterioration of the Chinese economy. Based on research on state-owned organizations, the higher the proportion of state ownership within a company, the worse its production performance. Conversely, the higher the proportion of corporate shares owned by non-state entities, the higher the company's performance is likely to be (Xu, 1997). This result indicates the relationship between ownership and enterprise performance in the Chinese context. According to research by Xu and Chen (2003), the ownership structure in Chinese organizations not only affects employees' performance but also equity structures and governance structures, which eventually

determine the profitability of the organizations. Based on their conclusion, non-state-owned organizations had higher corporate values and stronger profitability compared to state-owned organizations. Other research in this field has reached similar conclusions, indicating that non-state-owned enterprises were generally more efficient than their state-owned counterparts (Yao, 1998). Consequently, to address the economic decline of the early Deng era, the centrally planned economy was deemed inadequate for supporting China's development needs. This recognition prompted the introduction of market-oriented reforms, which ultimately laid the foundation for the economic reform and opening-up policy.

### 2.1.2.3 The Labour Event in 1989 and Its Influence Afterwards

According to the description from an ACFTU trade unionist, who was a supporter of this event: 'The Beijing Democracy Movement did not just shake the country; it shook the whole world. Apart from extreme frustration and great grief for those fighters and innocent ones who lost their lives, we did feel that this was yet another occasion when the Chinese people had risen' (Ping, 1990, p94). Because hundreds of thousands of workers participated in this event, it posed a serious challenge to the legitimacy and authority of the CCP as a regime able to act on and represent the interests of the working class.

The 1989 event that happened in Beijing has always been known as a student movement, but workers participated in these activities in the later stage. However, it still represented the establishment of independent worker organizations. This new development alarmed the CCP and directly led to a crackdown on June 4th. After the defeat of the workers' movement, the working class continued to be demoralized and atomized. After privatization expanded in China, many workers in SOCs were sacked, and 150 million 'peasants' became cheap laborers in the cities, leading to numerous labour resistance activities afterward, but none reached the political level of the 1989 event.

Following the death of politician Hu Yaobang in April, the democracy movement began in mid-April. The activities were first organized by university students to protest against corruption and official profiteering. Democracy was seen as the only solution to these problems. Many workers spontaneously went to Tiananmen Square to listen to students' speeches. Based on interviews with these workers during this event, they wanted to express their support to the students and their demands. One of the workers indicated, 'the students were criticizing the corrupt government, and they voiced what we workers wanted to say' (Ping, 1990, p25). On April 19, the students were violently expelled by the police. However, the movement did not end there. After the initial repression by the government, more and more workers began to join the activities and brought class insight into the movement through posters, leaflets, and public speeches. As mentioned above, civil liberties were absent in the economic reform. Therefore, freedom of speech and democracy became the main demands to end corruption.

On May 19, party secretary Zhao Ziyang was forced to resign. At the same time, Deng Xiaoping and Li Peng began preparing for a crackdown at the end of May. On June 3rd, the ACFTU in Beijing released a statement claiming that the behaviour was counterrevolutionary and needed to be banned by the government. The next day, troops began advancing into the capital. Hundreds of thousands of workers and students made their final effort to block the 100,000 troops entering the capital. The state feared that this workers' and students' movement would spiral out of control and decided to respond with a massacre.

After the massacre in Beijing, the resistance activity from workers and students finally ended. After the deaths of hundreds of people, student leaders were sentenced to jail, and at least twenty-seven worker activists were executed in June alone. Based on the argument from Au and Bai (2010), one of the main reasons for the movement's failure is that worker activists did not foresee and prepare for the violent response from the government. They were a very young labour resistance movement with little experience. The social and political demands raised by the workers and students were seen as a

serious threat to the regime's legitimacy. After this event, the working class no longer saw themselves as the core of industrial development, and their relationship with the CCP lost its "friend" label. According to the argument from Au and Bai (2010), the workers' movement in 1989 cannot be regarded as a pro-capitalist counter-revolutionary movement, as the CCP announced. The purpose of this activity was to protect state-owned property and stop bureaucracy. A letter from this event can support this argument:

"This country was built by us workers, by the effort and labor of all mental and physical laborers. We are the masters of the house, and this is beyond question. What course this country should take must first consult us. We would never allow them to turn the dictatorship of the proletariat into a dictatorship over the proletariat! We would never allow a handful of the scum of our nation and scum of our class to suppress the students, killing off democracy and trespassing on human rights in our name! ... For the sake of the course of socialist reform, for the sake of our democratic patriotic movement, and the sake of our next generation to breathe freely after wiping out the despotism of Stalinism... we appeal to our overseas fellow country people to act immediately... to support the democratic patriotic movement" (To Overseas Fellow Country People, May 26, in Zhongguo minyun yuanziliao jingxuan 1989b, 44).

Since 1989, no such political movement has occurred again. After this event, the CCP changed its attitude toward socialism and began to wish for a turn toward capitalism. However, the concept of liberty continued to be discouraged. Based on the argument from Au and Bai (2010), the brutal suppression of this event became a 'model' for labour resistance activities afterward. Examples can be found in the Daqing Oilfield workers' protest, where authorities sent tanks to the outskirts of the city to force workers to submit and give up their resistance. Other examples include the Shawei village protest, where authorities ordered open fire and killed at least three villagers during the event.

#### 2.1.2.4 Resistance to Privatization in Chinese Organizations

The CCP never expected that a huge number of workers would support the students' demand for basic democratic rights. At this stage, the authorities were alarmed by the potential power of the working class. The position of the ACFTU became even more powerless than before. The working class at this time became the second class in Chinese society, while entrepreneurs, with support from the CCP, became the first class. Bureaucracy became even more powerful than before and gradually transformed into a new class of entrepreneurs. In 1992, the Fourteenth Congress of the CCP put forward the concept of a 'socialist market economy,' which gave the green light to privatization. In 1996, a new policy was introduced, advocating for the retention of large state-owned companies and the letting go of smaller ones. As a result, a wave of dismissals began to revive the economy. As mentioned in the article above, the old-style planned economy had led to the deterioration of the Chinese economy, and changes were needed at that time. Based on research by Au and Bai (2010), many state-owned companies deliberately ran their businesses poorly, leading to bankruptcy and enabling management to plunder their assets and make money. Profitability became the key focus for businesses during this period. Between 1996 and 2005, the wave of privatization hit workers hard, leading to the second wave of labour resistance after the 1989 event.

According to data from the China Statistical Abstract in 2004, the number of workers in state-owned companies shrank from 112 million to 69 million between 1995 and 2003. Additionally, in urban collective organizations, the number of workers declined from 35.5 million to 9.5 million. Most importantly, the composition of the working class changed significantly. Due to the welcoming of private-owned organizations and the bankruptcy of state-owned companies, the power of entrepreneurs gradually increased, and they needed cheap labour for their development. Many poor rural residents left their land and sought jobs as migrant workers in cities. According to research by Au and Bai (2010), by 2003, the private sector alone had induced 120 million migrant workers (living in the countryside but working in cities). However, as migrant workers, their working conditions and wages were worse compared to the old working-class standards. Many new workers struggled to sustain

themselves with little social security. At the same time, with the decrease in the number of the old working class, they changed from being the majority to becoming the minority in society. According to the argument from Au and Bai (2010), these significant social transformations destroyed a large number of good jobs and replaced them with low-quality ones, providing potential grounds for the emergence of the new working class. At this stage, the Chinese working class can be divided into two groups: The old working class, employed in state-owned enterprises, now constitutes a minority, while the new working class—predominantly composed of rural migrants in the private sector—forms the majority. Both groups have experienced deteriorating working conditions and declining wages; however, workers in the private sector have faced significantly harsher conditions compared to their counterparts in the state sector.

Workers were no longer the 'leading class' in society but were considered second or even third-class citizens, especially for the new working class. People from the new working class could no longer be regarded as workers since they were not qualified enough to have permanent jobs. Based on the Chinese household registration system, individuals originally from the countryside, as part of the agricultural population, were not allowed to have permanent jobs in the city, making them the most vulnerable group in Chinese society. The Chinese household registration system, also known as the urban-rural separation policy of the HUKOU system, was established in 1958 as an effective mechanism for population control, and it continues to play a crucial role in the realities of a socialist state (Pun, 2005). This system subtly distributes people's settlement, social rank, food rationing, entitlements, and other life chances through political authority (Cheng and Selden, 1994; Fan, 2002). As a result, a significant social gap has been created between urban and rural areas. Individuals born in the city as 'non-agricultural' populations enjoy benefits provided by the state, such as higher wages, higher social status, and better living standards, which rural populations cannot achieve (Liu, 2007). On the other hand, peasants who work in the city cannot be treated as 'non-agricultural' populations and do not receive support and benefits guaranteed by the state. Under these circumstances, a mixed sense of frustration and injustice always accompanies this new working class (Shi, 2019). On the one hand, their presence solves the problem of worker shortage in the city; on the other hand, it maintains the low price of Chinese labour. The new working class is also referred to as the 'floating population,' indicating that they cannot stay in a single job for a long time due to low job security and low wages. No matter how long they have stayed in the city, they are still considered outsiders (Zhang, 2001). According to the argument of Li (2012), the situation of peasant workers can be regarded as a group that suffers from 'multi-level deprivation.' Although state laws claim to protect the rights and interests of peasant workers, most of these laws remain superficial and cannot provide adequate protection for this new working class (Shi, 2019). Additionally, the policies formulated by local governments may not fully correspond to, or even contradict, labour laws (Shi, 2019).

The situation of the new working class provided an excuse for resistance activities, and mobilizations became frequent during this period, although they often ended in failure. Resistance to privatization did not reach the political level, but it faced harsh repression. One example comes from the Zhengzhou Paper Mill, where workers united to struggle against privatization. One policeman shouted at the protesting workers, "We suppressed the movement in Beijing on June 4, 1989! It was a big movement, but we still managed to do it. You, you are just a handful of people!"

The defeat in 1989 largely crushed the political imagination of workers. Their attitude toward the government became complex. They disagreed with the government but also understood that their fate still relied on them. According to the argument from Au and Bai (2010), "they lost the ability to think and act in time" (491). Most of them believed that the fault lay with local cadres rather than the central government, and they believed that if the central government intervened, things would be much different. This idea is typical among Chinese people who believe that emperors are always benevolent and that all faults lie with bad ministers. This mentality explains the behaviours and actions of workers. The first step in labour resistance activities was often to petition Beijing, as workers travelled from their cities of work, consuming both time and expenses, in the hope that the central government would hear their requests and provide support. However, in reality, the central government did not care about

their petitions and only sought ways to suppress them. The state's strategy was to confine resistance to individual plants, making it easier to repress.

During the latter half of the 1990s, labour resistance activities against privatization reached their peak. According to reports from Ming Pao (1998), tours to provinces in 1998 were hindered as government departments' front doors were blocked by protesting workers. Although these protests were quite common during this time, only a small number of people knew the actual situation across the country due to news censorship by the central government. Only a small amount of information leaked from Hong Kong or overseas. It was not until the 2000s, with the highly developed and affordable internet, that some information from that time became known to the public. Moreover, resistance activities escalated both in terms of numbers and organization. Based on research by Au and Bai (2010), the occupation of workplaces and the implementation of workers' self-management became more common during the next stage.

#### 2.1.2.5 The trying for Non-Official Trade Unions in China since Hu-Wei's golden age.

There are two opportunities for the working class during the Hu-Wen administration from 2002 to 2012 contributed to this change. Firstly, the significant development of labour law potentially empowered workers in their employment relationships in China (Ngok, 2008). Secondly, the relatively freer environment encouraged the development of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that could potentially replace the functions of the ACFTU (Hui, 2020). Some researchers have voiced their argument regarding this circumstance. Many of them do not expect non-governmental organizational associations to have enough power to influence labour relations. Even within the golden age for collective action from Hui-Wen administration from 2002 to 2012, the power balance between the ACFTU and other labour associations is asymmetric (Friedman, 2014; Friedman and Lee, 2010; Pringle, 2011; Xu, 2013). Despite the increasing number of wildcat strikes during the golden age, the Chinese labour force is still not capable of challenging the existing market rules. The Party-State still plays the main role in influencing the situation (Feng, 2010; Hurst, 2009; Lee, 2007; Zheng, 2010). The ACFTU system will continue to play a role as a conduit to maintain the system (Shi, 2010). As the Chinese Party-State stays ahead of changes in labour relations, it prefers preventing the expansion of independent worker organizations without the necessity of making any fundamental changes. But whatever efforts it tries to make, the Party-State does not empower workers at the workplace. According to research by Hui and Chan (2015), with the introduction of trade union reforms, some independent unions are, to some extent, allowed. One example of an independent union is the Wal-Mart store in China (He and Xie, 2011). However, based on the research by He and Xie (2011), the true independent trade union in one of the Wal-Mart stores has been regarded as an unsuccessful experience due to pressure from senior managers and the lack of support from local governments. But the result of their research indicates a deeper understanding of the ACFTU and Chinese independent unions set up at this time. According to the research by Taylor and Li (2007), the ACFTU cannot be regarded as a trade union at all as the Western World does. It is only a 'state organ', closely subordinated to the Chinese Communist Party. Another argument from Bergene (2005) also mentioned that the former general secretary of the International Union of Food and Allied Workers, for example, refused to regard the ACFTU as a functional trade union. Based on the function of the ACFTU, it is an integral part of the Party leadership (Taylor and Li, 2009). 'The ACFTU can be seen as an integral part of state corporatism' (He and Xie, 2011, p424). It will not fight for the rights of workers but only play a role as a mediator between employers and workers (He and Xie, 2011). One example that happened in a Wal-Mart store proves these arguments. One of the workers was asked to be dismissed because of a simple mistake, which did not deserve this punishment. However, the ACFTU did nothing about it and agreed with the manager's decision. Only the true independent trade unions established by workers themselves that existed for a short period helped workers and successfully saved their jobs. On the other hand, independent unions are not always the true trade unions; they may deteriorate over time. According to the research by He and Xie (2011), newly established trade unions can be divided into bogus, genuine, and co-opted.

Based on the argument from He and Xie (2011), a bogus union is regarded as a workers' voluntary organization that represents workers' interests and fights for their rights. However, it is not legally recognized due to the lack of a formal election process. So, it is named 'bogus'. These unions also have another name, 'the hometown union'. These unions are organized by workers who distrust the official ACFTU and migrate from the same place. However, these kinds of unions are not always well organized and eventually become gangster-like clubs shaking up the established order (Taylor and Li, 2010). The change is mainly caused by the effort of the Party-State system to prevent renegade union activities. With the help of local governments, the 'bogus' unions may be replaced by 'co-opted unions' (He and Xie, 2011), which will be mentioned below. On the other hand, governments and enterprises legally acknowledge genuine unions, which are another kind of trade unions in China. Unlike a bogus union, it is a well-organized union and also aims to protect workers' rights and represent their interests. Workers directly elect union presidents. As mentioned above, the Wal-Mart trade union is this kind of union; however, these unions always have the same ending: they cannot survive for a long period (He and Xie, 2011). The co-opted union is the last kind of trade union in China. It is controlled by governments and organizations and occasionally defends workers' interests. However, its main role is to work as a mediator between employers and workers. It is like a smaller ACFTU. Most trade unions established at the time of golden age are this kind (He and Xie, 2011). The evolution of these three kinds of unions does not effectively alleviate labour resistance activities in China but becomes stronger and stronger. On the other hand, the requests from laborers involved in this resistance also change over time. Most importantly, they gradually lose confidence in these labour resistance activities. According to the ten-year cohort study between 2006 and 2015, which discusses the interaction between labour resistance and its potential for institutional changes in the field of labour relations in China, the result cannot be regarded as positive (Wang, 2016).

The research by Wang (2016) was conducted every two years, specifically in 2006, 2008, 2011, 2013, and 2015, based on the questionnaire and interview method for subjects who have experience in labour resistance activity. According to the research by Wang (2016), labour dissatisfaction with the ACFTU system was high and became higher in the last few years. Most of the laborers still believe that if the ACFTU system is reformed, trade unionism is necessary and has the potential to represent their rights and interests (Nichols and Zhao, 2010; Pringle, 2011). The case study based on wildcat strikes in China indicates a potential problem of this resistance activity, showing no solidarity (Wang, 2016). Workers' main request is to pursue their short-term interests but not intend to have a deep understanding of labour relations' configuration (Wang, 2013). Because of this, the increasing labour resistance may not necessarily translate into independent trade unionism or workers abandoning the ACFTU system (Wang, 2016, p11). The other result indicates that workers' attitudes and requests will become more conservative regarding the independence of the union if they experience more strikes (Wang, 2016). On one hand, it shows their deeper understanding of trade unions in the Chinese context that the Chinese Party-State will not easily allow independent unions. On the other hand, the laborers are gradually losing their confidence in these labour resistance activities.

However, leading by the influence of the golden age, some significant cases on collective labour resistance activities are worth to discuss. One of the most famous and be discussed about from scholars is the 2010 Nanhai Honda event. At the beginning of the 21st century, workers' protests reached a higher stage with more organized procedures and clearer targets. Most of the protests no longer resisted politics but focused on individual factories. Although most of these protests failed, there were still some partial victories such as Honda strike in 2010, Foxconn labour protests in 2012, Pinduoduo warehouse strike in 2020, and Meituan delivery drivers' protests in 2021. All these protests can be regarded as successful activities which in some extend fulfilled their request on wage increase. Due to their great similarity, the chapter will only introduce Honda event in details. However, scholars need to acknowledge that the outcomes of labour resistance activities can vary widely depending on the specific circumstances, the responses of employers, and government authorities (Friedman, 2014; Gallagher, 2002; Ngal, 2013). While some of the protests lead to concessions and improvements, most of them face significant repression from authority. Due to the tight control over labour movements from Chinese government, workers themselves cannot hold the key to determine the

outcome of collective action (Gallagher, 2002; Friedman, 2014, 2009). In general labour resistance activities, there was no luck at all. The authorities including government and employers were not easily to be persuaded. When the situation became serious, violent suppression and the failure of labour activities became inevitable consequences. However, the Nanhai Honda event in 2010 can be considered as one of the truly successful collective labour resistance activities.

The primary reason for the strikes that occurred at Nanhai Honda, a Japanese company in China, was the issue of wages. According to the New York Times, staff brought in from Japan could earn approximately 50 times more than Chinese workers. Furthermore, regular staff earnings were much lower than those at Honda's Chinese assembly factories, and interns were paid even less than regular workers and the industrial average (China Labour Bulletin, Research Report, 2012: 6). In comparison to Honda's profitability, the wages for regular staff were clearly inadequate. In April 2010, the conflict between workers and the company erupted. Honda failed to match the increase in the local minimum wage, and as management ignored their mounting discontent and refusal to grant a pay rise, regular workers secretly prepared for mobilization. Eventually, the strike at Nanhai Honda ended through negotiation between the union and employers under the witness of a third party, with minimal intervention from the Chinese authorities. The details of this event are significant in understanding the unique situation in the Chinese context.

#### 2.1.2.5.1 The Event of Nanhai Honda in 2010

For Chinese labour, there are no organizations that labour can join to mobilize each other for a strike. However, the ban from the law has little help to stop labour strikes. The information about the previous strike can still be received by labour from electronic media or other approaches, which can be regarded as former experience or even guidelines to organize resistance activities themselves. In the event of the Nanhai Honda strikes, based on the interviews from workers who participated in the strikes, workers had already begun to discuss strikes before 2010. They shared information about previous labour resistance activities that happened in other places or at other times in this company, such as the two-component factories strike that happened in 2006 and 2007 in Honda, and other four strikes in 2009 and nine strikes between January and March 2010 in the cities of Guangzhou, Foshan, and Zhongshan (Lyddon, Cao, Meng, and Lu, 2015). With the help from Lao Zhang, who is an experienced worker and had specifically represented workers in legal cases, he suggested that a strike would give some bargaining leverage to negotiate with the company (Wang, 2011). Laborers were encouraged, and mobilization was secretly planned. According to the argument from Kelly (1998), creating a sufficient 'critical mass' will be an important precondition for effective action in mobilization. Based on the argument from Hyman (1989), it is impossible to be organized without some degree of leadership. There may be many barriers for Chinese organizations without the traditional concept of a union. But for this case and other labour resistance cases in China, even without help from the union, leaders automatically emerge. At this time, 23-year-old Tan Guocheng, who had been working in Honda for a year and a half, began to persuade others to join him and took the lead himself. The only chance for him to persuade others was to use the opportunity on the shuttle bus to work. The result was that before the 17th of May, he created a 'critical mass' with 15 workers from Tan's workshop. They met one night to discuss the plan. Based on the news report from China Newsweekly (2 June 2010), eventually, twenty workers gathered and participated in the strike preparation. On April 29, after Tan handed in his resignation, another young man, a 20-year-old Xiao Lang, was persuaded by Tan and agreed to help lead the strikes, believing they had nothing to lose. China is a collectivist country, and people who pursue a collective interest for a group or society always receive higher cultural acceptance compared to someone who focuses on personal interest (Hofstede, 1980). Tan, as a strike leader, handed in his resignation, which also gave information to other workers that the mobilization was not for his interest but the common interest of every worker in Nanhai Honda company. This behaviour helped him gain more support from workers. Comparing to the profit-oriented management for their interest, the mobilization from labour is more likely to be defined as a just behaviour for Chinese people. With the help of Xiao, they created an Internet chat room on social media called QQ to spread their information more efficiently just before the strike

started.

The resistance activity eventually ended up with third-party negotiation after a few months of the fight between workers and management. This result was led by the infirm support from the Chinese officials to the management of the company, and widespread strike information successfully got the attention of the public. With the wide attention from the public, it provided a great precondition for a third party to appear. Not long after, the 'Chinese Workers Research Network' initiated an international solidarity statement, which was signed by many academics mainly from Hong Kong and Taiwan. This action from academics raised attention to the strikes and asked a university professor whether they wanted to act as a labour adviser. Because of this, this labour resistance event changed from conflict fighting to another path for peaceful negotiation. One source indicates that a Caijing newspaper reporter helped the worker representatives find a professor from Renmin University who was willing to participate in the negotiation (Wang, 2011, p18). Another source indicates that one of the representatives, Li Xiaojuan, found another professor and led to the preparation of negotiation between the strikers and the management from Honda company.

The negotiation time had been decided, which was on the 4th of June. Five representatives were elected to participate in the negotiation (Lyddon, Cao, Meng, and Lu, 2015). One was the activist who played an important role in writing the open letter, and the other was a young female worker representing the interests of women workers. She was elected because of her bravery at the beginning of the strike and was welcomed by other female strikers. On the day of the final negotiation, the participants included the workplace union's chair, in a symbolic role, chairing the negotiations, the five strikers' representatives, factory senior managers, and university professors as the labour adviser. Because the university professors were interest-unrelated third parties and earned the trust from both sides, they first acted as conciliators, trying to bring the sides together, and then as mediators, giving both sides recommendations based on their current situation according to their knowledge, such as letting the strikers secure a settlement to reorganize the workplace union. The negotiation can be separated into three stages. The final agreement was achieved in the last stage. According to the report, some workers wanted to give up after their first negotiation because of the lack of any progress in the meeting. In the second round, through the efforts of Chang Kai, the two sides reached an agreement on increasing wages by 500 yuan (a rise of about one-third above the existing wage) for workers. However, the agreement on reorganizing the workplace union did not reach at this time. According to the report interview about the relationship between the strikers and the official union from workers during this strike: 'They have organized this themselves,' said a workplace union official (Financial Times, 28 May 2010); and 'We are doing this ourselves. The [official] union doesn't represent us' (Financial Times, 1 June 2010). But even two years later, this request still had not been fully satisfied. According to the description from Lau (2012: 511), after the discussion of the reorganization of the union reappeared two years later, it was just like 'creating smoke and mirrors through a complicated electoral process. As a result, there was only very little change of personnel in the workplace union. Li Xiaojuan had been elected to the executive committee, but she left the factory for further study in August 2011. Another leader who participated in the draft writing of open letters also left the factory (Lau, 2012). The union accepted the negotiation result on wage rises in 2011 and 2012. But as the two leaders of the last strike left the factory, the management regretted their agreement with workers, which led to another strike with 100 production-line workers participating on the 18th of March 2013 and successfully forced the company to increase their lowest pay (Cheung, 2013).

#### 2.1.2.5.2: The Discussion on the Honda Event

Although in Chinese organizations, there are no organized unions before any of these strikes, leadership in mobilization never absent when the subjective feeling of injustice has become common among laborers. From this stage, the strikes or other kinds of labour resistance activities gradually become difficult to stop. Based on the case analysis of the Nanhai Honda events of 2010, the unique solution for Chinese labour to deal with employment conflict has been disclosure. According to research by Tung (2006), Taylor and Ladkin (2009), five stages can conclude the process of Chinese

labour resistance activities when the government does not intervene too much to influence the result of the labour movement. These stages include conflict, clash, communication, compromise, and consensus. All these processes can be easily found in the Nanhai Honda labour strike, as mentioned in the previous chapter.

The conflict stage could be regarded as the very beginning of the strike, as the feeling of injustice from laborers gradually becomes common among the majority. Although there may not be too much physical action in the resistance behaviour, early leaders of future strikes have already appeared, and everything has already been planned. According to Nanhai Honda labour strikes, because of the low pay compared to the average wages for workers, people in Nanhai Honda had already felt the injustice. With the persuasion from leader Tan Guocheng and the usage of social media (QQ) to propagate their message, more and more people joined the strike group, making everything fall into place.

The clash stage is the time when the feeling of injustice from laborers turns into physical strikes as everything has been well prepared in the previous stage. The management also operates their fight-back procedures, such as firing the current leader of the strike and using violent suppression against labour resistance. At this time, the conflict between laborers and management is maximized. As the strikes posted information on the internet, more and more people begin to learn about this event, which also provides a chance for the conflict to be resolved. This is a unique aspect of this resistance activity. The Chinese government did not completely block the information of the strike as they usually do, which provides an opportunity for workers to contact third parties. This may be due to the successful use of social media, although the great supervision of the internet might also play a role.

The communication stage is the time when the third-party approach takes place. Based on the Chinese concept of harmony, Chinese people are less likely to see the management as a complete enemy and strongly believe that they can still achieve a win-win agreement. With this mindset, they sought help from university professors who have great knowledge in dealing with employment conflicts. Because university professors are interested-unrelated groups and are respected by both sides, they are the perfect choice as a third party to take charge of the negotiation. As a result, communication between laborers and management was organized with the help of the third party.

The final stages of compromise and consensus indicate a situation where both sides show a willingness to compromise and reduce their initial demands to achieve a temporary agreement. Although it can only be regarded as a partial success, it is still satisfactory to both sides. For the case of Honda protest, the agreement between laborers and management lasted for two years after the management breached the agreement, which led to another strike.

These stages typically reflect the Chinese tendency when facing social conflict without government intervention such as suppression. Unlike the Western strategy of seeking an absolute and permanent conclusion to establish independent trade union, all the successful collective resistance activities are short-term interest-based protests with interest-based results. Labour protests and strikes at Foxconn led to wage increases and improvements in working conditions. The strikes at Pinduoduo warehouses resulted in concessions from the company, including wage increases and improved working conditions for some workers. The company implemented measures to address worker grievances, including reducing overtime hours and providing better living conditions for workers in dormitories. In Meituan, a food delivery platform, the drivers demanded better wages, improved working conditions, and an end to exploitative practices. Meituan responded by announcing wage increases and other benefits. The interest-based protest can be regarded as the choice of workers. But it is also the only choice they can make. What will be the result if Chinese workers seek an absolute and permanent conclusion, Jasic protests can be the example. In 2018, workers at Jasic Technology, a welding equipment manufacturer in Shenzhen, attempted to form an independent labour union. The workers faced intense repression, including arrests and dismissals. The behaviour to establish a union can be regarded as a challenging endeavour in China due to strict regulations and government control over labour organizations. The Chinese government and local authorities responded to the protests

with a combination of tactics aimed at suppressing the movement. This included the detention of workers and activists involved in the protests, the dismissal of workers, and efforts to disrupt and disband the nascent labour union. In addition to cracking down on the protests, the Chinese government also closely monitored and censored discussions about the Jasic protests on social media and online platforms to prevent the spread of information and potential solidarity movements. Eventually, the protest is sentence to dead. The only other similar protest according to the collect data that tend to build independent trade union is the Shenzhen Artigas Electronics Factory protests in 2013. Similar as the outcome of Jasic, they did not success under strong suppression from government.

### 2.1.3 Section conclusion:

In this chapter, I discuss the working-class movement in different period in the Chinese context and working-class efforts in these periods for collective voice and independent unions under the political suppression of Chinese authority. From the fact of Chinese collective resistance activities, I can conclude that China is an authoritarian society, and their main goal is to guarantee the existence of the regime and their absolute power within society to protect their interests (Pei, 2016; Nathan, 2012, 2003; Shirk, 2007; Gilley, 2004) (which will be discussed further in the chapter on the hierarchical system in China). To achieve that goal, as the target of labour resistance activities is not to overthrow the regime or challenge their position by building unions, the authorities do not see much influence on their interests, regardless of the consequences. In most of the time as we can see from Honda protest, the workers did not get what they wanted, and there was only a minimal change that did not harm the company. This small scale of impact is not significant enough to affect the economic cooperation between the Chinese government and Japanese entrepreneurs. Thus, staying away from the situation is the best solution. However, for the other kind of protests that aim at independent union is a different kind of story. The independent union that away from control of Chinese authority can be the place to unite grass root power, which potentially threat authoritarian position of CCP. They cannot stand a political party emerging from grass-root community that may potentially divide their political power. Therefore, the development of collective voice and action have to under the control of the Chinese authority. For them, to protect their interests and position, collective voice or action should always be deemed as 'inappropriate.' However, to understand the possibility of an independent union in the Chinese context, it is also necessary to discuss theories of collective voice and union operating strategies, which will be focused on the next chapter.

From this chapter, the most significant characteristic of Chinese working-class collective voice is that every movement of resistance should be under the supervision of the CCP. In other words, if there were no powerful authority controlling the outcome of union activities, there might be different outcomes for collective voice emerging from the working class.

In the next part, I will discuss the theory of collective voice to gain a better understanding of worker resistance in the Chinese context. Although most theories about collective voice and trade unions fit the Western context and differ greatly from the Chinese situation, they may share similarities that suggest a similar outcome in union development. According to analysis in the British context, such similarities exist. In the next chapter, I will introduce the union context in Britain and relevant theories on collective voice and union strategy to gain a better understanding of the nature of labour resistance activities. Then, I will reanalyse the characteristics of Chinese union protests to find clues for understanding the development of collective voice from working class in the Chinese context.

## Literature Review Section Two: Unions' failure and their combat strategies

### 2.2.1 Section Introduction:

In the previous section, I discussed the difficulties of union activities in the Chinese context. In this section, you will see that the essential challenge for unions is the legitimacy of the hierarchical system through my analysis on unions' situation in the Western world and the comparison with China. This will serve as the bridge to the next section, where I address this problem, led by the hierarchical system.

This section will introduce theories that are relevant to union organization in the West. It will also explore the union situation in the West and discuss the powerless position of trade unions. The discussion will focus on 'capital disconnection' as the common challenge faced by Western unions. Unlike the context in China, where there is no political party or government preventing the existence of trade unions in a capitalist society, Western trade unions still encounter similar consequences, finding themselves in a powerless position under the dominance of a capital-based hierarchy.

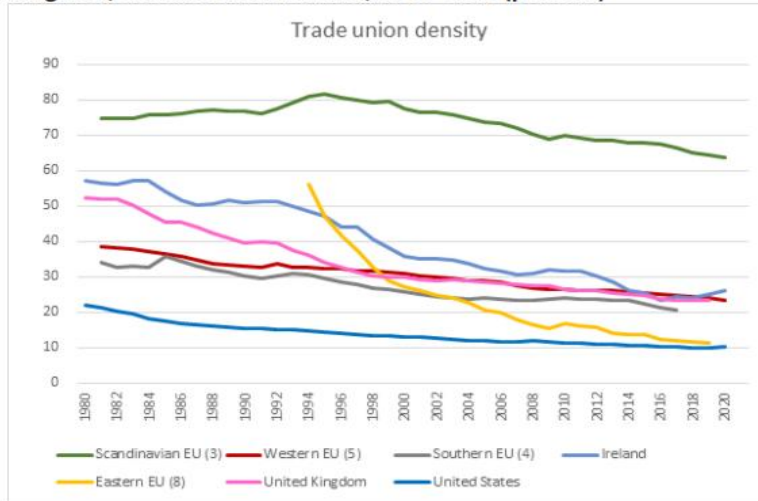
So, what is wrong with the union? Why can't the union, representing the concept of egalitarian principles, prevail? Scholars such as Cramsci (1935), Althusser (1970), and Bourdieu (1979) point to the acceptance of hierarchy as an institutionally determined ideology and culture issue. To ensure the dominant position of capital, an ideology that legitimizes and disguises inequality within capitalist society has become prevalent (Althusser, 1970). In this sense, the hierarchical structure has been accepted by the public, even by the most powerless groups. The reverence for hierarchy highlights the similarity between China and the West in terms of the path of collective voice and action. Therefore, the rejection of Chinese political authority cannot truly clear the path for an independent union in the Chinese context, as it is overshadowed by the dominance of the hierarchical concept.

However, as argued by Weber (1968), the acceptance of the hierarchical concept is the consequence of industrial capitalism. In other words, it is the result of institutional facts. According to Diefenbach (2013), Institutional structures serve as both the product and the reinforcement of hierarchical ideology, shaping cultural norms that legitimize inequality while being continuously legitimized by those very norms. This cyclical relationship ensures that institutional realities sustain the dominance of hierarchical systems, while the prevailing ideology reinforces and stabilizes these structures, making hierarchy appear natural and inevitable. China has experienced a wave of institutional changes from an economic perspective, driven by the open-up policy. This change implies a sign that challenges people's views on politically based hierarchical concepts in China. It might offer an opportunity for the development of collective voice and action in the future Chinese context.

## 2.2.2 The Powerless Position of Unions in the West

According to Johnstone (2015), the concept of "voice" has historically been synonymous with trade unions due to the inherent power imbalance between individual workers and employers. Collective representation was believed to be more effective and secure compared to individual voices. However, over the last forty years in the Western world, the influence of trade unions has steadily declined, raising questions about the future of worker voice. Research by Darvas, Gotti, and Sekut on collective bargaining in the West (2023) indicates that the decline in union membership has occurred in all Western countries, albeit to varying degrees.

**Figure 1: Trade union density and collective bargaining coverage in the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States, 1980-2020 (percent)**



Source: OECD/AIAS database on Institutional Characteristics of Trade Unions, Wage Setting, State Intervention and SocialPacts (ICTWSS).

Between 1980 and 2020, the rate of union membership in the United States, for example, dropped by half, from a relatively low 22 percent in 1980 to just 10 percent in 2020. In Eastern European countries, the most significant decline in union membership occurred during the 1990s, coinciding with the transition from socialist economic systems to market economies. During this transition, union membership, previously used to express political preferences and necessary for career advancement, sharply decreased. The dataset I have covers most Eastern European countries starting from the mid-1990s when the average unionization rate was around 60 percent. Since then, union membership in Eastern Europe has dwindled to nearly 10 percent, approaching the levels seen in the United States. In the United Kingdom and Ireland, union membership dropped from more than half of the labour force in the early 1980s to just one-fourth by 2020.

From an employer's perspective, trade unions are no longer the sole option for worker representation outside the public sector. Employers now have the choice of employing fashionable HR techniques as part of their approach to managing work and employment, which may be more favorable to their interests (Johnstone, 2015). These "modern" approaches to voice often possess more direct and individualistic characteristics (Willman et al., 2007).

Not only from the employer's viewpoint, but research focusing on workers also indicates the disadvantages of trade unions. According to research by Boxall et al. (2007), workers prefer a form of voice that can directly address and resolve current issues rather than indirect forms of voice. Some studies even suggest that workers doubt the effectiveness of union representation and prefer non-union forms of representation. This raises the question of whether the power of unions has a positive relationship with worker voice, meaning that voice also declines with the decline of trade unions.

It can be argued that employers have now recognized the importance of managing "worker benefits" and worker rights and have established voice mechanisms without the involvement of trade unions. The risk of exploitation is less prevalent in today's organizations, especially in advanced economies. However, this unitarist argument has been deemed ill-conceived, oversimplistic, and naive by many employment relations specialists (Johnstone, 2015). Much research on non-union worker representation indicates a complex situation regarding worker voice, suggesting that non-union representation is not a universal solution to replace the function of trade unions (Gollan, 2009). Some arguments even suggest that the sole purpose of non-union voice is to enhance company productivity and efficiency, rather than advocating for the interests of workers (Gollan, 2009).

Based on research on non-union representation for workers, several limitations challenge the unitarist perspective. First, non-union worker representation often lacks access to the resources needed to effectively evaluate the issues discussed in meetings. Representatives frequently lack sufficient training to represent worker views adequately. Second, few delegates are elected by workers themselves; most are appointed by managers or hold the most senior positions. Management typically controls the structure and agenda of meetings. The extent of decision-making power held by representatives is questionable. Third, most representatives only have the power to make recommendations, while managers retain the right to veto decisions. Fourth, few representatives negotiate or bargain for rights concerning pay and conditions, and the issues they discuss often lack financial, investment, or strategic data. Finally, grievance handling and conflict resolution are typically managed by local managers or internal dispute resolution mechanisms, with non-union representation playing no role in these areas, unlike traditional trade unions (Gollan, 2009).

From the perspective of voice dimensions, non-union voice mechanisms may have less influence and be more shared. They often lack the power to make critical decisions regarding financial matters and bargaining for worker pay and working conditions. In contrast, trade unions frequently remain outside the strategic realm of managerial decision-making and deal with issues primarily through line managers (Simms, 2015).

According to an article by Simms (2015), British trade unions rely on workplace representation structures and often lack legal avenues, such as labour courts, to enforce collective agreements. In large organizations, bargaining rights are typically granted to specific business units, as these organizations may recognize numerous bargaining units due to increasing outsourcing and mergers and acquisitions (Smith, 2012). In such cases, large organizations must negotiate with numerous different unions, leading to inefficiencies in worker's voice. Additionally, at the corporate or strategic level, most British organizations lack formal worker representation in information and consultation regulations. While some organizations have such bodies, they are often weak and ineffective (Hall and Purcell, 2012).

Considering the arguments presented above, it becomes evident that both the unitarist and pluralist frames face significant challenges. From the pluralist perspective, the key objective is to reconcile differing viewpoints and keep conflicts within acceptable bounds, thereby minimizing power imbalances in society and the workplace (Ackers, 2014). The major challenge faced by pluralists is how to effectively fulfill their role in representation and conflict moderation among various interest groups (Johnstone and Ackers, 2014). Some argue that establishing functional rules for employers to constrain behaviours that may harm workers' interests is essential. However, with the decline of unions, they often lack the necessary influence in many private sectors (Wanrooy et al., 2013). Therefore, the erosion of union influence alongside the growth of non-union "voice" has not altered the basic distribution of power at work. Employer-led agenda setting, constrained mandates and resources for worker representatives, and the relegation of input to advice rather than decision rights on pay and conditions indicate deeper institutional constraints. In this sense, weak labour voice is less a matter of organisational capacity than a structural outcome of contemporary corporate governance and financialised performance standards. To understand why labour remains in a bargaining deficit even when multiple channels formally exist, attention must shift to the tensions between corporate finance centres and operational units, and to decision processes oriented toward short-term returns that reconfigure employment relations and erode trust. The next subsection therefore introduces the framework of disconnected capitalism, showing how financialisation and hierarchical authority interact to reproduce asymmetric power inside firms and, in doing so, provide a system-level explanation for the patterns described above.

### 2.2.3 The Theory of 'Disconnected Capitalism'

Based on Thompson's research (2003, 2011), corporate structures have transformed into semi-

autonomous units over the past decade. In these units, maximizing labour productivity is the primary focus in a competitive business environment, and corporate decision-making is based on the rate of return on investments in business units. The term 'disconnected' refers to the fact that managers within business units often have a good understanding of reaching agreements with workers that ensure productivity. However, the corporate centre shows little interest in such agreements. According to Thompson's argument (2011), disconnection has two dimensions. The first dimension is the contradiction between the increasing demand for workers to have the power to make substantial discretionary decisions and the shifted risk to workers through flexible and insecure forms of employment. For example, employees with insecure employment on open-ended contracts can have their employment terms changed with little notice when decisions about disinvestment are made. This phenomenon indicates a low level of trust between business units and the corporate centre. The second dimension involves the corporate centre's perspective, where sustainable agreements that promote high-performance practices, such as partnership, may not be the best option for maximizing investment returns. To maximize returns, surplus value from labour or other sources, such as supply chains, is often targeted for extraction (Froud et al., 2000). For instance, the corporate centre may decide to shift production to a new location to avoid union bargaining, which undermines job security in exchange for productivity. Both dimensions reflect the powerless position of employees and workers.

Thompson's argument on 'disconnected capitalism' implies the influence of financialization on corporate decision-making strategies (Simms, 2015). The extensive use of financialized practices significantly impacts employment relationships, particularly in HRM (Thompson, 2011). According to Thompson's argument (2011), as financialized decision-making strategies dominate organizations, HR managers increasingly lose their power to challenge senior managers and provide independent advice on worker well-being. Some scholars refer to this domination as 'market rationalism.' In this context, efforts towards commitment enhancement or cultural change within the organization are no longer prioritized (Thompson, 2003; Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005). This challenges the feasibility of the unitarist perspective on industrial relations and, at the same time, highlights the difficulties of implementing pluralist. Based on Ulrich's argument (1997), the role of HR managers is to act as 'business partners' who assist senior managers in achieving their strategic objectives. In this role, HR provides advice on worker well-being and acts as an arbitrator to balance worker voice and organizational productivity. However, according to Kochan's argument (2007), HR has lost its power to truly challenge senior managers and provide independent advice on employee well-being due to the dominance of financialized decision-making strategies. Other researchers also present similar arguments regarding this dominance, referred to as 'market rationalism,' which prioritizes short-term financial returns over long-term cooperative relationships (Thompson, 2003; Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005). Thus, achieving and maintaining a high level of trust between workers and employers becomes difficult due to 'disconnected capitalism' (Simms, 2015).

From a trade union's perspective, if senior managers prioritize instant financial profit over reaching agreements within the employment relationship, a partnership strategy with a trade union may not make a substantial difference in this relationship. Kelly's study (2004) suggests that partnerships are welcomed by some employers because they anticipate potential benefits in making reasonable agreements with trade unions and workers. However, the gains within the partnership are often limited for workers or trade unions, especially in discussions related to wages, working hours, holidays, or job losses. For a partnership to be beneficial to workers, two conditions need to be fulfilled: trade unions themselves must have some degree of power, and the organization must perform well financially (Kelly, 2004). Based on relevant research, the ideal notion of equal gains between employers and workers within partnerships is not always supported. Some negative outcomes, such as job insecurity, increased work intensity, and a greater distance between unions and their members, are still observed in partnership organizations, often comparable to non-partnership organizations (Danford et al., 2005; Kelly, 2004; Upchurch et al., 2008). Guest and Peccei's argument (2001) suggests that even broadly positive research on partnership indicates an imbalance in gains between employers and workers. Achieving ideal mutual gains in partnership may be unrealistic, as common interests often tend to

benefit employers more than workers.

For an organizing strategy, the recognition of the concept of zero integration from supporters makes the management class naturally reject organizing unions. The extra financial and social advantage from management make this kind of union difficult to process. Moreover, the business environment may not be conducive to pursuing an equal power relationship between management and the union, as corporate governance systems prioritize short-term performance and shareholder value over long-term relationships with union (Heery, 2002). Financialization, that emphasis the maximum of short-term interest has become a dominant inner value in capitalist societies (Weeks, 2014; Lapavitsas, 2013; Palley, 2008; Epstein, 2005). In this sense, to expect institutional reform from legal aspect to reinforce the power of union, which potentially challenge the inner value of capitalism is not realistic in a short period. From the workers' and employees' side, some workers may have concerns about union power and influence, fearing that unions may restrict their job mobility or ability to negotiate individual employment terms, which hampers their career development. So, union membership offers benefits such as job security, wage increases, or better working conditions may not always be the best choice. Not to mention that employers can persuade workers not to join the union and participate in organizing campaigns with the promise of promotion or the threat of dismissal (Simms, 2015). Without addition support from legal aspect, organizing have little role to play its role. The compromise to management, whether through the process of partnership or organizing, indicates the acceptance of the concept of hierarchy under capitalism. On the one hand, 'market rationalism' prioritizes the interests of management and the organization over those of employees and workers. This power imbalance reflects a hierarchical structure where decision-making authority and control are concentrated at the top levels of the organization. On the other hand, HRM practices can perpetuate and legitimize existing hierarchical systems (Thompson, 2011). For example, performance appraisals, a common HRM tool, can be used to reinforce managerial control and assess worker compliance within the hierarchical structure. In this sense, the concept of 'disconnected capitalism' can be regarded as a reflection of the hierarchical system, which reinforces the power of capital authority.

#### 2.2.4 Failure of the Union

When examining the union situation in China, I have highlighted the significant role played by Chinese political authority, which obstructs the development of collective voice and action through a hierarchical system. The concept of 'capital disconnected' introduces another form of authority within the Western world that processes a capital-based hierarchy. Therefore, I can conclude that the common barriers in both East and West are in large extent stemming from the acceptance of hierarchical systems. Linked to the Chinese context, the capital disconnected and financialized decision-making strategies can also be observed in Chinese entrepreneurs' attitudes towards labour resistance activities. The pursuit of low-cost, short-term, and high-profit strategies for business development poses significant challenges for partnerships and promotes organizing labour resistance activities, as mentioned earlier. Although Britain and other Western regions are not authoritarian places like China, the idea of financialization creates another kind of authority fuelled by short-term interests—the authority of shareholders. The meaning of the union is to maintain a power balance between workers and employers to ensure equal treatment within the employment relationship. However, equal treatment cannot guarantee the maximization of individual interests for the powerful group. As financialization remains the dominant inner value in society, any form of partnership or organizing may be a dream difficult to accomplish or a disguise to cover the controversial unequal relationship. Decentralizing the power that prevents people from pursuing their personal or group interests is a strategy guided by the value of hierarchy. From the perspective of employers, guided by financialization, the union is seen as representative of egalitarianism. Although there is common ground between egalitarianism and financialization, the principle of equality does not always align with maximizing profits for the dominant group. The idea of hierarchy can be seen as the inner force that causes an imbalance of power between the union and the employer. The imbalance of power within employment relationships leads to the inevitable consequence of

hierarchy. Different from China, where authority comes from political parties and the government, financialization and 'market rationalism' create another authority driven by the idea of maximizing self-interest, playing the role of authoritarianism disguised as an egalitarian culture. From this perspective, there are not many differences between China and the West in terms of employment relationships, but rather in who plays the role of authority—capital or the party. If the union can be seen as the representation of the principle of egalitarianism, their true enemy will not be the employers or the capital held by various shareholders, but the authoritarianism itself fuelled by the idea of hierarchy and self-interest values.

### 2.2.5 Hierarchy and Culture

To better understand hierarchy, the definition of culture provides clues. According to the arguments from Marx and its development from the Frankfurt School, culture is a mass unity that obscures class differences in capitalist society. Based on the arguments from Marx and Engels, most societies are unified by a common set of beliefs and values that originate in the economy, and this cultural unity is dominated by production relations in society. "The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relations, the dominant material relations grasped as ideas; hence of the relations which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance" (Marx and Engels, 1976, p.59). Marx (1967) refers to this fallacious consciousness as 'commodity fetishism,' which unites all classes and obscures the inequalities between them. According to the arguments from the Frankfurt School, including Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1944), Erich Fromm (1941), and Herbert Marcuse (1964) indicate that all classes living under capitalism are distorted by the structure of the market system in their consciousness and personality. This system, under monopoly capitalism, is dominated by large-scale, mass-production corporations and generates authoritarian personalities that create cultural products for society. From this perspective, culture itself becomes a reified commodity that obscures the oppressive production relations between people (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972). The real symbolized class inequality is eradicated by culture and takes on the appearance of a leveled democracy in which all are equally served by mass-produced abundance (Adorno, 1993; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972). These theories clarify the relationship between culture and the industrial production system. The characteristics of culture are largely determined by the industrial relations within society, obscuring the inequality reality between different classes and making people accept hierarchy. Although we have already left the age of monopoly capitalism, the domination value from capitalism remains strong, reflected by the fact of 'capital disconnected.' Led by the replacement of large-scale, mass-production corporations, the previous single-dominated authoritarian social value has also been replaced by a more complex and fragmented cultural environment. However, the internal force of hierarchical capitalism value sharing by the majority has not changed much. The capital disconnect can be regarded as one of the examples.

In contrast to Marx and the Frankfurt School's theories, another scholar, represented by Weber, identifies culture as ranked diversity rather than mass unity. Weber agrees with some of the ideas from Marx and the Frankfurt School, as they argue that the function of culture is to legitimize social inequality, but Weber focuses on how this reality is accomplished. According to Weber's argument, culture is the way for people with different beliefs and values to struggle for honour and prestige. Unlike Marx's theory, which suggests that different classes in society share similar beliefs to hide the real class differences, Weber (1968) indicates that culture explains the reality that may differ for each individual but shares the same goal of legitimizing inequality and making some individuals seem superior to others. For his idea, the concept of hierarchy is more like the instinct of human being to be superior or dominate to others. An example of this theory can be found in religious beliefs. Salvation religions are usually produced by intellectuals to fulfil their own metaphysical need to understand the world as a meaningful cosmos. On the other hand, to attract a broader range of adherents, the beliefs change to suit the desires of the lower classes as compensation for their suffering. From this perspective, culture itself changes to become a product that fulfills the mental needs of different social status groups to accept current hierarchy while maintaining old consumers and attracting new ones. By doing this, the honour and prestige of different classes can be maintained, obscuring the

inequality in society to a large extent. Based on more recent research on the concept of the Protestant work ethic (PWE), which can be translated as the notion of 'wake up early and you will see, work and you will have,' people who work hard will succeed, two opposite understandings of current society can be observed: one is a dominant view, and the other is an egalitarian view (Ramirez, Levy, Velilla, and Hughes, 2010). People who hold the dominant view are more likely to justify their prejudice and use differential treatment of a wide variety of less successful or disadvantaged individuals, including homeless persons, overweight persons, and women, and believe that their outcomes are directly caused by their lazy lifestyle (Crandall, 1994, 2000; Levy, Freitas, and Salovey, 2002; Levy, West, et al., 2006; Quinn and Crocker, 1999). They believe they belong to the people who wake up early and work hard, which legitimizes their privilege and prejudice in society. On the other hand, people with an egalitarian view, especially children, are more likely to explain the sentence as the description that effort is something that equalizes people of different social categories (Ramirez, Levy, Velilla, and Hughes, 2010). According to the argument from Levy, West, and Ramirez (2005), the value of PWE held by people depends on their age and social status. Based on research by Ramirez, Levy, Velilla, and Hughes (2010), on the one hand, European American adults are more likely to hold a dominant view of PWE, which to some extent indicates their group's superiority in society. On the other hand, African Americans of all ages, who have historically and currently been a disadvantaged and stigmatized group, always hold an egalitarian view to explain PWE, making up for the disadvantages through their honour and prestige while ignoring their social inconvenience. Even for the people who are holding the dominant view, their idea still originally comes from the egalitarian principle that the disadvantaged group is the loser of a 'fair' social competition, which legitimizes their prejudice. On the one hand, people from the superior group define their success as the result of hard work and ignore their natural advantage through society. On the other hand, the disadvantaged groups are very good at diverting their own attention from hierarchical facts that may hurt their self-esteem. By offering different explanations and emphasizing different aspects of the same social phenomenon, all people with different social statuses convince themselves that their perspective successfully reflects the 'truth' of the society. The true reality has been distorted by social cultural elements that serve all classes or individuals in society, making everything seem 'fair' as people expect and allowing everyone to satisfy themselves in their living society. This obsession with 'superiority' encourages self-interest values within society, becoming a hotbed for the idea of hierarchy and directly causing the capital disconnected. This obsession is not solely the responsibility of the dominant class, as it still requires the 'cooperation' of the subordinate class to ignore the reality of inequality and hold a positive view elsewhere. In this kind of society, both the dominant and subordinate classes believe in inequality but describe it from different angles to satisfy themselves.

The arguments from Marx and the Frankfurt School indicate the close link between culture and industrial relations. Weber, on the other hand, indicates how social inequality values are obscured within a more complex and fragmented cultural environment. Both theories imply that the reason for the acceptance of hierarchy, in which the capitalized institution creates culture to legitimize inequality that advocates the value of self-interest and the belief in a hierarchical system, which, in contrast, promotes the dominance of capital. So, what about the situation in the Chinese context?

## 2.2.6 The Social Change in China and Its Alignment with Culture

China underwent a significant economic transformation starting in 1978, driven by economic reform and open-up policies. This socio-economic shift can be seen as a pivotal moment when China moved away from a planned economy and embraced a new market-oriented path. It also marked the onset of labor resistance activities, driven by the privatization resulting from economic reforms, which undermined the social status of the working class and rendered them powerless. As industrial relationships changed due to the market-oriented economy, the cultural beliefs held by the Chinese people also evolved, as previously discussed in the arguments of Marx and the Frankfurt School.

According to research conducted by Martinsons and Ma (2009), there are generational differences in the cultural beliefs held by Chinese people. They categorized the generations into three groups: those

born before 1950 (Republican group), those born between 1950-1970 (revolution group), and those born after 1970 (reform group). They compared the concerns of these different groups regarding self-interest, social relationships, rules and laws, majority rights, and equity and fairness. The theory of subculture suggests that events experienced during an individual's formative years, such as childhood and adolescence, have a more significant impact on their values compared to other life stages (Strauss and Howe, 1991; Inglehart, 1997). Chinese individuals born in the 1960s and 1970s experienced economic reforms during their formative years, which led to differences in their cultural outlook compared to previous generations.

The results of Martinsons and Ma's research (2009) indicate that the reform generation exhibited a higher level of acceptance of individual privacy and a stronger belief in both self-interest and majority rights. While this research supports the argument made by Marx and the Frankfurt School regarding the connection between culture and industrial relations, it does not explain how economic reform and the open-up policy led to this shift in cultural perspectives. To address this question, a deeper understanding of the Chinese economic and social context is necessary.

Before the market reforms and open-up policy in China, the "planned economy" played a pivotal role. The concept of the market and a liberal economy was largely rejected by the government, and there were no privately-owned organizations in China. All means of production were publicly owned, meaning they were all state-owned enterprises. Consequently, there was no competition in the Chinese market, and the social structure was entirely controlled by the Chinese government, leading to a high level of hierarchy within society.

During this period, workers were labeled as the "leading class," which afforded them certain privileges and helped them attain a favored social status. For instance, during political movements like the Cultural Revolution, workers were the least susceptible to repression. However, despite these privileges, workers lacked real power in the workplace or on a national level. While they enjoyed job security and couldn't be dismissed by managers, they had little influence in voicing their opinions or participating in decision-making. Workers typically spent their entire careers at the same workplace and were accustomed to unquestioningly following orders (Au and Bai, 2010).

However, this phenomenon resulted in the decline of the Chinese economy. Research on state-owned organizations has shown that the higher the proportion of state ownership within a company, the worse its production performance, while companies with a higher proportion of corporate shares tend to perform better (Xu, 1997). Due to the absence of competition in the Chinese market, workers in state-owned organizations lacked motivation for high production. From the perspective of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), resolving the economic decline became urgent in the 1970s. The old, planned economy could not meet the demands of China's economic development, leading to the introduction of the new concept of a "market economy." This economic reform in China changed the cultural elements held by the public to align with the new economic environment.

After the economic reform, Chinese society became more capitalist than before. With the emergence of a new entrepreneurial class and a multitude of privately-owned organizations, the Chinese market was no longer peaceful but rather competitive. However, despite the closure of many state-owned enterprises, those that remained continued to play a central role in the Chinese economy. In essence, the power of the Chinese government remained absolute. According to the "Circular of the General Office of the State Council on Forwarding the Guiding Opinions of SASAC on Promoting the Adjustment of State-owned Capital and the Reorganization of State-owned Enterprises" in 2006, state-owned organizations should maintain absolute control over critical sectors and key areas that concern the national economy and national security, such as defense, energy, petroleum, telecommunications, coal, civil aviation, and shipping. While some business sectors are not entirely controlled by the government, monopolies from state-owned organizations still exist in these fields (Sheng and Zhao, 2012).

However, the rush of market reforms led to inflation and bureaucratic corruption. According to research by Meisner (1996), bureaucratic corruption was fueled by the price reforms that introduced two pricing systems: "planned prices" and "market prices." Some officials had the privilege of buying valuable products at lower planned prices and reselling them at higher market prices. Bureaucrats began to act like capitalists due to this phenomenon. This corrupt behavior by bureaucrats eventually angered the people, especially workers whose interests were greatly affected by the business reforms, leading to the democracy movement in 1989.

As a result, crony capitalism had a significant impact on Chinese cultural beliefs. The most evident influence was the level of power distance among Chinese people. According to Hofstede's research (2001), China is identified as a high-power distance nation. Power distance refers to individuals' acceptance of inequalities in power (Hofstede, 2001). In high-power distance societies, people are more likely to unquestioningly follow authority and show a high acceptance of social hierarchy. Conversely, individuals in low-power distance societies are more likely to question authority when they believe a decision may be incorrect and are more likely to hold egalitarian views (Koziuk, Dluhopolskyi, Farion, Dluhopolska, 2018).

According to research on black box data from numerous aviation disasters (Metscher, Smith, and Alghamdi, 2009), low-power distance environments are often associated with disasters in which crew members failed to challenge the pilot when they identified a fatal error during a flight. Low-power distance cultures have been found to be important in maintaining inequalities in societies (Koziuk, Dluhopolskyi, Farion, Dluhopolska, 2018).

Before the economic reform in China, there was no competition in the market, and decisions of "life or death" were not made within Chinese organizations. It was unnecessary for organizations, especially state-owned companies, to listen to suggestions from subordinates for their development. This lack of competition in the market and absence of questioning the authorities led to the expected deterioration of the Chinese economy and the prevalence of a high-power distance environment. This high tolerance for hierarchy became a necessary cultural factor to fit the crony capitalist system.

Consequently, Chinese people showed a higher level of power distance compared to the West. However, after the economic reform and open-up policy in China, more and more privately-owned organizations emerged, and many foreign-owned organizations entered China. The dominance of old cultural principles, such as high-power distance, was challenged in a competitive environment. The importance of creativity for economic development was openly acknowledged by Chinese officials in 2014.

As the power of the entrepreneurial class grew stronger after the economic reform, with a market-oriented strategy (Au and Bai, 2010), the principles of high-power distance were no longer as suitable as before. In a low-power distance society, doubtful decisions from authorities are more likely to be questioned, and subordinates are more likely to express their ideas (Koziuk, Dluhopolskyi, Farion, Dluhopolska, 2018). According to research by Wang and Wang (2017), the Chinese new generation (born in the 1980s and 1990s) is more willing to express their opinions. This suggests the possibility of a lower power distance level among these younger generations compared to previous generations.

However, while there is much research focused on the generation gap among Chinese people, there is limited research on the changes in power distance between generations in the Chinese context. For this research, power distance will serve as a starting point for discussing the concept of a collective voice for the Chinese new generation. A hypothesis can be formed that the Chinese new generation will exhibit a lower level of power distance compared to previous generations. Nevertheless, focusing solely on power distance has its limitations. The cultural dimension of power distance alone cannot provide a complete picture of the values arising from the discussion between authoritarianism and egalitarianism. Low power distance regions may still experience the dominance of authoritarian values, as seen in the union dilemma in the UK.

However, power distance from the cultural dimension can still be considered as one of the meaningful reference points for measuring values, as low power distance undeniably characterizes egalitarianism. The idea of a trade union indicates the pursuit of social equality and fairness by the comparatively powerless group in society. According to Weber's argument (1968), culture is how people with different beliefs and values struggle for honor and prestige. To legitimize the reality of inequality in society, the existence of a collective voice becomes a meaningful system that makes things appear fair. Therefore, theoretically, the idea of a collective voice and action that advocates egalitarian values has a natural appeal to the subordinate groups in society, especially the working class in China. Thus, value research on the working class will be meaningful.

The explanation from a cultural perspective elucidates how the concept of hierarchy is accepted by different classes within society. The scholars mentioned earlier indicate the acceptance of hierarchy as an institutionally determined cultural issue. However, research on hierarchical systems does not stop here. Scholars, including Giddens (1984), Sidanius (2004), and Diefenbach (2013), have developed these ideas from the Frankfurt School and Weber, providing more in-depth arguments on hierarchical systems and illustrating the processes by which inequality is legitimized within society. These scholars will be further discussed in the next chapter.

#### 2.2.8 Section Conclusion:

In this chapter, I have introduced theories relevant to union organization in the West, including partnership and organizing. I then discussed their common issue, which is exacerbated by the 'capital disconnected' phenomenon, considered the result of a capital-based hierarchical system. This phenomenon highlights a similarity with the Chinese political authoritarian system, both of which obstruct collective action and voices. Therefore, rejecting Chinese political authority alone may not clear the path for independent unions in the Chinese context, as the example from the West illustrates the dominance of a hierarchical system. In other words, the acceptance or ignorance of hierarchy is the underlying force that legitimizes the position of political authority in China.

Based on the discussions of hierarchy from Marx and Weber, I acknowledge that the veneration of hierarchy is a consequence of institutional facts that generalize the legitimacy of superior groups within society. Consequently, any change in institutional facts may potentially challenge the existing hierarchical system. In this chapter, I broadly discussed the changes brought about by the open-up policy and economic reform, which have the potential to weaken the prevailing hierarchical concept among the Chinese people. However, due to the limitations of the hierarchical theory, I cannot provide an in-depth discussion in this chapter. In the next chapter, I will comprehensively introduce the hierarchical system, mainly based on the theory developed by Diefenbach (2013). I will further discuss how the hierarchical system is created, maintained, and ultimately dismantled, which will serve as the guiding framework for this research.

### Literature Review Section Three: Hierarchical theories and discussion

#### 2.3 Introduction

This section examines how hierarchy in China works both as a formal architecture of ranked authority and as an informal mindset reproduced through routine behaviours, fear–attraction dynamics, and

role socialisation. It then considers how these mechanisms often convert institutional reforms—frequently framed as “empowerment” or participation—into managed, top-down adjustments that preserve status asymmetries. Drawing on Diefenbach’s General Theory of Hierarchical Social Systems, together with insights from structuration and social dominance approaches, the analysis shows that authoritarian durability rests not only on institutions but also on everyday ethical orientations toward authority, reciprocity, and egalitarian negotiation. In doing so, the section provides a bridge from macro-level persistence of hierarchy to the micro-level moral considerations that enable or inhibit collective action, preparing the ground for the empirical findings on workers’ ethical choices and attitudes toward different forms of collective voice.

China’s political order is widely characterised by authoritarian durability (Shambaugh, 2009; Nathan, 2003). Despite successive waves of global democratisation and episodes of turbulence, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has maintained rule. As He and Su (2018) note, since the nationwide upheaval of 1989, large-scale protests explicitly targeting regime change have not reappeared. This absence, however, does not imply a “safe zone.” By official and unofficial estimates, everyday contention has remained high—tens of thousands of incidents annually, including petitions, strikes, assemblies, marches and demonstrations—with occasional confrontations against local officials or sporadic violent resistance (He & Su, 2018). Participants cut across social strata: peasants (O’Brien & Li, 2005), urban residents (Huang & Yip, 2012), workers (Lee, 2007) and dissidents (Chase & Mulvenon, 2002). Digital media further complicates repression by enabling mobilisation, coordination and diffusion of information (Bondes & Schucher, 2014; Esarey & Xiao, 2011; Yang, 2003). Yet, despite this complex repertoire of contention, the core architecture of authoritarian rule remains intact. The analytical question, therefore, is not whether contention exists, but why it so rarely scales into systemic change. In what follows, I address this puzzle by treating hierarchy as the source of authoritarian resilience and by examining how ethical orientations toward authority and fairness condition the possibilities of collective voice and independent union formation.

### 2.3.1 Defining Hierarchy

Following a long line of scholarship, hierarchy can be understood as a relational order organized around inequality. “Relationship” here signals that at least two units—individuals, groups, organisations or larger aggregates—are linked in patterned interaction (Mosca, 1971; Scott, 1990). The linkage is asymmetric: one party stands as superior, the other as subordinate, a binary that is enacted in familiar oppositions—command/obedience, control/being controlled, guidance/being guided, having/not having, leading/being led, exploiting/being exploited (Diefenbach, 2013, p. 37). Put succinctly, hierarchy is the systematic establishment, maintenance and ideological justification of social inequalities between persons or groups (Diefenbach, 2009a; 2013; see also Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Levy et al., 2001). Through this lens, authority and privilege are distributed according to ranked positions, normalising a high power distance as the background expectation of social life.

Crucially, hierarchical order is not merely an external structure; it is sustained by shared notions of legitimate inequality. As Diefenbach (2013) argues, actors are labelled “superior” or “inferior” because hierarchical ideas prevail; under genuinely egalitarian assumptions such labels would lose their grounding. The unequal relation—even between just two persons—forms the nucleus of any hierarchical system, from which broader stratifications ramify. In complex societies, such relations are multi-layered and cross-cutting: the same actor can be a superior in one context and a subordinate in another, shifting positions across settings and interactions. This role fluidity aligns with classic observations on authoritarian dynamics—“dominant toward one’s inferiors and submissive toward one’s superiors” (Adorno, 1950, cited in Ashforth, 1994, p. 760)—and helps explain how hierarchical expectations become routinized across organizational and societal levels.

### 2.3.2 Power and Hierarchy

In practice, superiority and subordination are often anchored in formal roles—master/servant, capitalist/worker, monarch/vassal—where authority is specified by recognised positions and rules. Yet hierarchy also takes informal forms grounded in biological, physical, cultural, psychological, sociological, or material distinctions. Gender, appearance, nationality, personality, class and income can all furnish status cues and access to resources, thereby creating criteria for differential power. Across these settings, hierarchy is inseparable from power and control: inequality between “superiors” and “subordinates” rests on asymmetries in the capacity to direct others and shape outcomes (e.g., Brown et al., 2010; Clegg et al., 2006; Barker, 1993). Deliberately maintained power gaps—through organisation, law, property, expertise or narrative—constitute a structural mechanism by which hierarchical relations are stabilised and legitimized (Spierenburg, 2004; Finkelstein, 1992; Willmott, 1987; Zeitlin, 1974). Once ranked power is in place, superior/subordinate roles tend to crystallize and reproduce themselves.

In Weber's classic formulation, power is the ability to impose one's will within a social relationship even against resistance, regardless of the source of that ability (Weber, 1980 [1921]). This capacity—to affect others' actions and inactions—captures the essence of hierarchical dominance. Much of the literature, therefore, examines hierarchy within formal organizations, where job titles, reporting lines and procedural rights make control visible and enforceable (Finkelstein, 1992; Willmott, 1987). However, hierarchies also arise and persist through informal mechanisms: tacit norms of deference, status beliefs, moralized role expectations, and everyday judgement about who “deserves” to lead. Such informal hierarchies draw on values and attitudes that differ across actors and contexts (Zenger, 2001). Because they are embedded in mindsets and routines, they can outlive formal redesign. Even when organizational charts are flattened or participation is increased, hierarchical expectations may reassert themselves through informal channels—who speaks first, whose voice is treated as authoritative, which claims are deemed reasonable.

This duality—formal structure coupled with informal disposition—helps explain the resilience of hierarchical orders and poses two analytic questions that guide the remainder of this section. First, why do hierarchical arrangements so often blunt individuals' desire or capacity for change, even when alternatives are visible? Second, how and why do nominally non-hierarchical settings drift or revert into hierarchy over time? Addressing these questions requires moving beyond structure to the ethical-psychological underpinnings of hierarchy—fear, conformity, self-interest and beliefs about legitimate authority—which, as the next subsections argue, anchor power differences in everyday conduct and make hierarchy difficult to dislodge.

### 2.3.3 Formal Hierarchy and Social Adaptation

As Diefenbach (2013, p. 75) observes, “Societal institutions, especially hierarchical systems, are large machines that socialise and condition the individual... rules and norms, structures and processes, and policies and procedures have already been established, and it is up to the individual to comply and fit in.” This perspective highlights a strong psychological drift toward adoption and conformity rather than change. Socialization works through the system, and individuals reciprocate by adjusting to it. Diefenbach emphasizes two reinforcing motives: fear and attraction. On the fear side, hierarchical institutions typically combine clear rules with sanctions. Newcomers arrive amid uncertainty about expectations and consequences; to avoid error and punishment they re-align behaviour to fit prescribed roles. Over time, role-consistent conduct reshapes attitudes, a dynamic vividly illustrated—albeit controversially—by Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment, where ordinary students acting as guards adopted punitive behaviours (Zimbardo, 1971; Haney & Zimbardo, 1998, 2009). Prolonged exposure to hierarchical settings can thus normalize hierarchical thinking and diffuse it to peers.

Conformity is also sustained by classic normative and informational influences—the twin desires to be liked and to be right (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). In stratified contexts, people tend to defer “upwards” and police “downwards,” sometimes acting punitively toward lower-status others (Myers, 2013). Such patterns are associated with heightened concern for status and sharper right–wrong schemata among highly hierarchical individuals (Saucier et al., 2009). On the attraction side, hierarchies deliver tangible benefits—predictability, protection, advancement opportunities, and identity rewards—not only to elites but, in constrained ways, to subordinates as well (Diefenbach, 2013). Much like a needs hierarchy, the system can satisfy security and affiliation needs inside its boundaries; as a result, people often choose the system that also chooses them. The perceived gains of staying—access to resources, status signals, reduced uncertainty—frequently outweigh the risks and costs of dissent or exit.

These advantages coexist with significant harms. Inequality, oppression and exploitation generate cumulative disadvantages for those lower in rank: restricted access to resources and opportunities, and narrower life chances. Even so, collective action faces high switching costs. In China, for example, contentious episodes can meet coercive responses; activists risk job loss, detention or disappearance (He & Su, 2018). Many who contest workplace injustice also rely on state or organizational institutions for permits, recognition or livelihood, creating a paradox of dependence on the system they oppose. Hierarchies further stabilize themselves through selective rewards for adaptation, offsetting some burdens and enhancing the perceived rationality of compliance (Diefenbach, 2013). In such settings, the calculus of fear and attraction helps keep the machinery running.

Beyond fear and attraction, hierarchies are sustained by psychological synchronization between positions. Sidanius and Pratto (1999, p. 45) argue that group-based hierarchies persist not simply through domination by elites or passive compliance from subordinates, but through the coordinated activities of both. Attention and deference track social position: the views of high-status actors are treated as more relevant, shaping whose preferences and frames are considered in decisions (Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Diefenbach, 2013). Through everyday coordination, emphasis shifts from disagreements (“who should decide?”) to shared efficiency goals (“how to decide faster?”). This synchronization improves cooperation but also naturalizes hierarchy, muting conflict between superiors and subordinates and, over time, codifying role expectations. Together, socialization, incentive structures and synchronized routines explain why formal hierarchies prove resilient and why attempts at reform often leave the underlying ethical–psychological foundations of authority intact.

#### 2.3.4 Formal–Informal Transformations and “Change Without Change”

Hierarchy is an abstract organizational order that must be enacted in everyday life. Formal principles, rules and procedures do not operate in a vacuum; they are applied—and often reinterpreted—by actors in concrete settings. Thus, when an authoritarian political system weakens or even collapses, the associated formal hierarchy does not automatically vanish. As Diefenbach (2013) argues, hierarchical order provides not only prescriptions for behaviour but also a dominant logic that is internalized. In the absence of explicit commands, that logic is reproduced informally: members import formal hierarchical reasoning into the unwritten organization of their affairs (Diefenbach, 2013, p. 80). Over time, the formal separation of superior and subordinate roles transmutes into tacit acceptance of power differences, reinforcing unequal relations even where formal roles no longer require them. This is why actors occupying the same nominal level may still treat one another unequally.

Through this transformation, hierarchy ceases to be merely the name of a political or organizational system; it expands into a value orientation that shapes everyday judgement. Hierarchical expectations become the practical common sense of social life and, reciprocally, help stabilize whatever formal hierarchy remains. As Myers (2013, p. 342) notes, indifference to injustice often

stems not from the absence of moral concern but from a failure to recognize injustice as such. Accustomed to stratified orders, people may experience exploitation yet channel effort into attaining a “higher” position rather than questioning the order itself. In that sense, what proves hardest to change is not the organizational chart but the deep-seated evaluative commitments—the ethical and cultural assumptions—through which hierarchy is rendered legitimate (Diefenbach, 2013; Kohlberg, 1973; Hofstede, 1980).

This helps explain a recurrent pattern of “change without change.” Social movements and reforms are often framed as engines of transformation, yet under hierarchical value regimes, change can be co-opted to consolidate advantage (Dent & Barry, 2004; Skålén, 2004; Burrell, 2002; Sehested, 2002). Diefenbach (2013) notes that revolutions and restructurings frequently rearrange elite composition while leaving core networks and mechanisms intact. Power adheres less to individuals than to positions; leadership exits trigger succession rather than systemic rupture. In such dynamics, there is always a superior and a subordinate, with little in between.

A prominent organizational illustration is top-down empowerment (Musson & Duberley, 2006). Participation is promoted in the language of collaboration and inclusion, yet the initiative remains managed from above. As a result, “empowerment” often shifts practices and vocabulary without reworking the value base. Where hierarchical assumptions are deep-rooted, actors may re-read empowerment as an invitation to “demonstrate leadership,” thereby assimilating the innovation back into existing status logics (Diefenbach, 2013). From the perspective of those in authority, carefully controlled empowerment can enhance productivity, flexibility and morale while preserving the hegemonic order (Jermier, 1998): subordinates feel involved, but the horizons of legitimate challenge remain bounded. The pattern is well documented: structural adjustments that do not address the ethical–cultural supports of domination (e.g., obedience, deference) rarely unsettle hierarchy (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972; Diefenbach, 2013).

China’s post-1979 reforms offer a concrete illustration of reconfiguration rather than dismantling. Market opening reoriented the CCP’s social base toward an emerging entrepreneurial class. Before reform, workers enjoyed employment guarantees, social benefits and the symbolic status of a “leading class,” yet possessed limited voice and remained strongly subordinate to superiors (Au & Bai, 2010). With marketization, entrepreneurs re-entered public life and rose in status; however, hierarchy endured. State-owned entities retained decisive power, producing a controlled rather than liberal market. Formerly privileged insiders could reposition as market actors without renouncing hierarchical advantage, sometimes with tacit political backing. Constitutional revisions—such as abolishing the right to strike and entrenching private property protections—further institutionalized the new order (Au & Bai, 2010). In this milieu, officials transitioning to business could leverage prior privileges, contributing to corruption and, ultimately, the crisis climaxing in 1989 (Meisner, 1996). The broad effect was not a demolition but a managed transformation: reform extended the language of participation and market freedom while retaining a top-down logic that channelled initiative and preserved ranked authority (see also Pun, 2005; Howell, 2015).

Taken together, the formal–informal conversion of hierarchical logics and the co-optation of reform help clarify why hierarchies persist under institutional flux. Unless change penetrates the ethical–psychological foundations—beliefs about legitimate authority, status, fairness, and what counts as “normal” deference—formal redesigns are likely to be reabsorbed into familiar patterns. This diagnosis underscores the relevance of the ethical orientations analyzed in this thesis: only where fear is overcome, self-regarding calculation gives way to other-regarding reciprocity, and egalitarian consensus is treated as a criterion of legitimacy, does change move beyond language to alter the lived grammar of hierarchy.

By this point, the analysis has shown that China’s authoritarian durability rests not only on formal

institutions and coercive capacities but also on the everyday reproduction of hierarchy through fear–attraction dynamics, role socialization, and the quiet conversion of “reform” into managed, top-down empowerment. These mechanisms travel between formal charts and informal mindsets, naturalising unequal power and blunting the scale-up of contention—even when digital media expands repertoires of protest. To move from description to explanation, the next section develops a theoretical lens that can connect these macro patterns to micro orientations. I therefore draw on Diefenbach’s General Theory of Hierarchical Social Systems to specify how power, institutions, and sociocultural norms co-produce hierarchical endurance, and pair it with Kohlberg’s moral stage framework to identify the ethical considerations that enable or inhibit resistance in practice. This integration clarifies why overcoming fear, shifting from self-regarding calculation to other-regarding reciprocity, and treating egalitarian consensus as a criterion of legitimacy are preconditions for collective voice and independent union formation in the Chinese context.

### 2.3.5: The development history of Diefenbach’s general hierarchy theory

Diefenbach’s general hierarchy theory (2013) advances the foundational concepts of Giddens’s structuration theory (1984, 1976) and Sidanius et al.’s social dominance theory (2004, 1999) by integrating their core principles into a more expansive framework that conceptualizes hierarchy as a universal organizing structure within social systems. While Giddens’s structuration theory emphasizes the duality of structure and the dynamic interaction between individual agency and institutional frameworks, Diefenbach refines this perspective by focusing specifically on the role of hierarchies in shaping and being shaped by social systems. Similarly, building upon Sidanius et al.’s emphasis on group-based inequalities and the perpetuation of power structures through legitimizing myths, Diefenbach broadens the concept of dominance to encompass organizational, political, and interpersonal contexts. By synthesizing these theoretical foundations, Diefenbach provides a more holistic and nuanced framework that underscores the integral role of hierarchies.

#### 2.3.5.1: Structuration Theory

Giddens’s structuration theory (1984, 1976) attempts to explain the correlation between social systems and human actors and how this correlation is produced and reproduced by dynamic relationships, wherein human actors both enable and constrain each other (Dillard et al., 2004). According to Giddens’ argument (1976, p. 121), “Structuration, as the reproduction of practices, refers abstractly to the dynamic process whereby structures come into being. By the duality of structure, I mean that social structures are both constituted by human agency, and yet at the same time are the very medium of this constitution.”

Giddens’s theory indicates how human agents (individuals) both create and are constrained by social structures through their actions. The theory suggests that structures are created and reproduced by agents through human practice, implying that hierarchical systems can also be regarded as outcomes of individuals’ regular social actions (Giddens, 1984). However, Giddens’s theory is highly abstract, clearly identifying the broad relationship between human actors and social structures. However, due to its abstraction, the specific perspective of the individual is largely ignored.

Critiquing Giddens’s theory, Diefenbach (2013) contends that individual identity has been reduced to an impersonal, faceless entity, akin to a nameless robot. The lack of identification of social individuals makes discussions on power within social structures almost impossible. Its silence on the relationship between individuals and social structures becomes the primary barrier to this social model. Although the constraints faced by human actors from social structures, they constitute imply hierarchical elements within these structures, the theory fails to acknowledge power disparities between individuals, making it inappropriate or premature to discuss hierarchy. However, Giddens’s theory (1976) indicates that the reality of social structure is represented by routine social practices as resources for its creation. Other scholars such as Diefenbach (2013) share a similar conclusion and

rename it as 'routine behaviour,' implying that the creation and maintenance of hierarchical social structures also rely on such regular social practices. However, Giddens misses the analysis and discussion on cross-border activity. His social structure theory does not evaluate deviant behaviours from individuals resulting from disagreements or misunderstandings about social expectations, routines, and values, which may potentially challenge or damage existing social structures.

In summary, Giddens's theory (1976) highlights the process through which social structures are generated and regenerated through human social practices. However, it fails to provide a clear answer to what drives these practices and whether there is a possibility to halt them. His emphasis on regular social practices offers a broad insight into the relationship between individuals and social structures but requires more details for an in-depth understanding, particularly concerning hierarchical social structures. For these reasons, other social structure theories need to be considered to support research endeavours.

#### 2.3.5.2: Social dominance theory

Sidanius et al.'s social dominance theory (2004, 1999) can be regarded as a significant development from previous theories. It not only analyses how group-based social hierarchical systems utilize unequal distribution to segregate privileges, prestige, and social power among social units but also explains why such hierarchical and oppressive structures are widely accepted, propagated, and enduring. The central questions posed by Sidanius and Pratto (1999, p. 1) are: "Why do people from one social group oppress and discriminate against people from other groups? Why is this oppression so difficult to eliminate?"

The social dominance theory (SDT), as described by O'Brien and Crandall (2005), is rooted in the observation that human societies inherently tend towards social hierarchies. SDT posits that this inclination constitutes a fundamental human drive for group-based inequality, termed as social dominance orientation. Driven by this orientation, individuals desire and support group-based hierarchical social structures with dominance exerted by the 'superior group' over the 'inferior group'. According to SDT, both superior and inferior groups mutually endorse and contribute to the hierarchy, underpinned by their own rational myths that legitimize the existence of inequality. These legitimizing myths encompass attitudes, values, beliefs, stereotypes, and ideologies of different social units, providing moral and intellectual justification for the distribution of social values within the system. Individuals' respective social positions become the basis for power distribution and are considered deserving of their positions. SDT posits that humans are driven to maintain hierarchical power structures, irrespective of their own group's social position, due to deeply ingrained perceptions of a just and legitimate social order. The pressures of dominance and legitimizing myths collectively sustain the status quo.

According to the theory of social dominance, nearly all cultures, despite varying historical backgrounds, share similar psychological, social, and institutional interactions. These forces reinforce each other, perpetuating the persistence of hierarchical social structures (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999). In comparison to Giddens's structuration theory discussed earlier, the more multidimensional and focused approach of social dominance theory makes it a more advanced framework for understanding social hierarchy. It centres on group-based social hierarchies, presuming that certain individuals can dominate or be dominated by others based on group membership (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999). As remarked by Diefenbach (2013), Sidanius and his colleagues provide comprehensive empirical data across individual, micro, and macro levels, illustrating how individuals' identities and behaviours are influenced by their group status.

However, criticisms of the theory cannot be dismissed. One of its strongest critics is that it attributes group-based hierarchy and social oppression to a gender-dependent phenomenon (Diefenbach, 2013). Although the model of social dominance categorizes group-based social hierarchy into three types based on age, gender, and stratification systems (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999), it fails to offer a

clear explanation for the selection of these categories over other possibilities. Moreover, their findings on social dominance primarily pertain to males, leading to suspicions regarding the selectivity of their cases. Group-based hierarchy and social oppression should not be exclusive to women, but the research does not address this adequately.

Furthermore, while Sidanius and his colleagues define hierarchy as an inherent tendency in human society that creates group status, they overlook other crucial factors such as power, access to institutions, and sociocultural influences that can explain how group status is established and maintained. Another critique by Diefenbach (2013) is that hierarchy seems to stem from indicators or outcomes such as privileges, oppression, exploitation, and injustice based on factors like race, gender, religion, education, nationality, and social background. However, these are indicators rather than causes. The hierarchical social order can be explained through individual aspects such as moral character, mindsets, and performance of specific individuals; micro aspects involving abstract organizational mechanisms; or macro aspects concerning societal institutions and resources. While Sidanius and his colleagues touch on this to some extent, they overly emphasize 'age' and 'gender', which Diefenbach describes as unnecessary and unfortunate.

In conclusion, social dominance theory undeniably offers valuable insights into understanding societal hierarchies. However, as discussed above, it still lacks certain details that need to be addressed. The next theory to be introduced successfully overcomes these weaknesses and further enhances the understanding of social dominance theory.

#### 2.3.5.3: The general discussion of the General Theory of Hierarchical Social Systems

The General Theory of Hierarchical Social Systems was formulated by Diefenbach in 2013. In comparison to the social dominance theory, this comprehensive theory provides a deeper understanding of hierarchical systems, encompassing both individual and group perspectives. It examines how social dominance, privileges, and the exploitation of certain individuals are either reinforced or challenged by social structures and processes.

Addressing the gaps left by the social dominance theory, the General Theory incorporates the roles of power, access to institutions, and sociocultural factors. According to Diefenbach (2013), power stands as the cornerstone of hierarchy. Typically, individuals in higher positions wield greater power to make influential decisions, allocate resources, and govern the actions of less powerful groups. Power serves as the internal force that upholds the advantageous status of superior groups, cementing the existing social order. Conversely, undermining power imbalances through resistance and collective action is pivotal in challenging hierarchical foundations.

In hierarchical societies, institutions serve as tools for the dominant group to codify and enforce norms, rules, and practices, thus perpetuating hierarchy (Diefenbach, 2013). As the scaffolding of the hierarchical system, institutions empower individuals from superior groups who shape rules and policies to further entrench their positions. Access to institutions represents a privilege that defines acceptable behaviour within a hierarchical society. Disrupting unequal access to institutions and advocating inclusive governance that reflects equitable values becomes a potent challenge to hierarchy itself (Diefenbach, 2013).

Sociocultural factors, often overlooked by traditional sociological research, gain paramount importance in Diefenbach's perspective. He emphasizes them as crucial for comprehending various societies. The rationale behind this belief will be explored later in this chapter. Sociocultural factors, including norms, beliefs, and values, contribute to legitimizing hierarchical systems. Inequality is frequently rationalized and justified through cultural narratives that present it as merit-based, traditional, and naturally ordained (Diefenbach, 2013). These factors shape individuals' self-perception and their anticipated roles within the hierarchy. Critically assessing and reshaping these cultural narratives with a more just and egalitarian value system emerges as a robust challenge to

existing hierarchical orders (Diefenbach, 2013).

Sociocultural movements can lead to shifts in people's attitudes toward the social system, potentially facilitating a more equitable arrangement in contrast to hierarchy. According to Diefenbach's theory (2013), these three factors - social power, access to institutions, and sociocultural dynamics - are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Social power dynamically influences access to institutions, which in turn molds sociocultural norms and beliefs. Addressing these factors individually triggers a chain reaction that threatens the entire hierarchical system. Successful resistance to hierarchy often necessitates a simultaneous engagement with all these dimensions. This multi-dimensional epistemology of hierarchical systems portrays them not just as structural configurations but also as intricate interplays of power, institutions, and cultural factors that can be transformed through collective endeavours.

Comparing with Giddens's Structuration Theory, there is a degree of consensus between the two. Firstly, both theories acknowledge the interactional relationship between social structure and agency in shaping social phenomena. They both recognize the significance of regular social practices in producing and reproducing social structure in Giddens's theory and empowering and maintaining hierarchical systems in Diefenbach's theory. Secondly, both theories view the social system as a dynamic and evolving process. According to Giddens's theory, the social system needs to be upheld through individuals' regular social practices. Diefenbach, on the other hand, believes that maintaining the social structure is not the sole option for individuals. Behaviour that challenge existing social structures, such as hierarchical systems, through cross-border actions, are also part of the narrative. It's clear that Diefenbach's theory focuses more on hierarchical systems and resistance activities, approaching them from a multidimensional perspective. This focus is one of the key reasons for selecting Diefenbach's theory to comprehend Chinese working-class resistance activities.

To summarize, several reasons prompted me to choose Diefenbach's General Theory of Hierarchy (2013) over Giddens's Structuration Theory (1984, 1976) and Sidanius et al.'s Social Dominance Theory (2004, 1999):

1. In comparison to Giddens's theory, Diefenbach's theory specifically targets hierarchical social systems, providing a richer understanding of power dynamics and norms within such systems. It not only explains how hierarchy shapes society but also offers insights into resistance strategies.
2. Diefenbach's holistic approach encompasses various dimensions like identities, emotions, interests, and ethics, facilitating a comprehensive analysis of the persistence of hierarchical systems and avenues for resistance. This approach addresses gaps left by Sidanius et al.'s Social Dominance Theory, such as power dynamics, access to institutions, and sociocultural factors.
3. Diefenbach's theory extends its focus beyond immediate social interactions to encompass the potential long-term transformation of hierarchical systems. This perspective underscores the role of ethics and morality in catalysing lasting societal change.
4. Diefenbach's theory is particularly suited for cross-cultural research due to its emphasis on ethics and morality as universal concepts transcending cultural boundaries. This attribute makes it apt for understanding social phenomena in the Chinese context.
5. Diefenbach's theory is closely linked to grassroots activities, particularly highlighting how resistance to hierarchical systems from grassroots movements can be successful when grounded in ethical principles. Given this research's focus on working-class collective voices, this theory serves as a guiding framework.

Diefenbach's theory's most distinctive feature is its innovative argument that ethics and morality act as potent drivers for social change, introducing a new dimension to comprehend social transformation and hierarchical systems. It underscores that resistance activities against hierarchical systems should be founded on principles of justice, equality, and fairness. This ethical lens becomes crucial for societal change, as ethical and moral factors pave the way for lasting transformations. This discussion on ethics and morality will be explored further in the subsequent part of this chapter.

Naturally, Diefenbach's theory has certain limitations that merit discussion. As highlighted by critiques from Child (2014), Diefenbach treats power descriptively rather than analytically. A more in-depth exploration of power from political perspectives and the process of its legitimation and mobilization could greatly enhance the theory. The discussion could extend to various forms of ownership's impact on hierarchical relationships. However, these limitations do not negate the internal logic of Diefenbach's argument on hierarchical systems. Despite its limitations, this research finds Diefenbach's theory suitable for understanding Chinese hierarchical systems.

Another limitation that Child points out is that Diefenbach overlooks how the size of social units influences the efficiency of hierarchical systems (Child, 2014). In the Chinese context, the prevalence of labour resistance activities and the establishment of labour-movement-based non-governmental organizations in the southern regions, distant from China's political centre (Beijing), should not be ignored. While the reasons behind this phenomenon require further research, it's evident that expanding hierarchical levels will inevitably increase the challenges of governing within a hierarchical system (Child, 2014), especially in a populous country like China. However, this limitation does not impact the suitability of Diefenbach's theory for this research.

### 2.3.6: Further development of Diefenbach's theory and its application on other research

Although the limitations on his theory cannot be ignore, Thomas Diefenbach's general hierarchy theory has become a cornerstone for contemporary organizational studies, offering a robust framework to analyze the persistence, adaptability, and influence of hierarchical structures in various contexts. In my research, I employs Diefenbach's (2013) theory on hierarchy to analyze the entrenched hierarchical structures in China and their implications for labor activism. Diefenbach argues that hierarchical systems are not only maintained through institutional mechanisms but also through deeply ingrained ethical and value systems. The thesis applies this framework to understand why Chinese workers struggle to form independent trade unions, despite increasing labor disputes and economic shifts. It posits that the hierarchical system in China is reinforced by cultural and ethical norms that emphasize obedience and deference to authority, making collective labor action difficult. Not only for my research, there are some other articles that have been cited over 100 times and have applied the theory from Diefenbach (2013) across disciplines to interrogate themes such as power dynamics, the interplay of formal and informal hierarchies, and the coexistence of traditional and emerging organizational forms, organizational change and innovation, identity and social process. Collectively, these studies underscore the theoretical and practical significance of hierarchical systems in understanding complex organizational phenomena.

#### 2.3.6.1: Hierarchical Structures and Power Dynamics

Several studies emphasize the interconnection between hierarchical structures and power dynamics within organizations. Dörrenbächer and Gammelgaard (2016) investigate how subsidiaries in multinational corporations employ issue-selling tactics to navigate asymmetrical power relationships with their headquarters. By drawing on Diefenbach's theory, they elucidate how subsidiaries engage in entrepreneurial activities within the constraints of hierarchical control. Similarly, Suzuki and Hur (2020) explore the influence of bureaucratic structures on organizational commitment among civil servants in 20 European countries. Their findings highlight the role of formalized hierarchy, as described by Diefenbach, in fostering stability and individual engagement within bureaucratic systems. These studies demonstrate the utility of Diefenbach's framework in examining the relational dynamics of power and its implications for organizational outcomes.

#### 2.3.6.2: Formal and Informal Hierarchies in Organizational Behaviour

Costas and Grey (2014) and Diefenbach and Sillince (2011) focus on the duality of formal and informal hierarchies within organizational structures. Costas and Grey examine the role of secrecy as a

mechanism of control and identity formation, underpinned by hierarchical dynamics. Their analysis draws on Diefenbach's insights to reveal how formal rules and informal norms jointly sustain organizational secrecy. In a complementary study, Diefenbach and Sillince delve into the coexistence of formal and informal hierarchies, offering a nuanced perspective on their interaction and influence on organizational effectiveness. Together, these studies validate Diefenbach's assertion that formal and informal processes are inherently interconnected, shaping the social fabric of organizations.

#### 2.3.6.3: Adapting Hierarchies in Contemporary Organizational Forms

Blagoev et al. (2019) and Lumby (2017) extend Diefenbach's theory to explore the adaptability of hierarchies in modern organizational settings. Blagoev et al. analyze coworking spaces as hybrid systems that blend formal hierarchies with informal community networks, illustrating how hierarchical elements persist even in ostensibly flexible environments. Lumby critiques the assumption that distributed leadership dismantles hierarchical structures, arguing instead for the enduring relevance of bureaucracy as an organizational form. By leveraging Diefenbach's critique of hierarchical systems, both studies reveal how traditional structures adapt to meet contemporary challenges, providing a counter-narrative to the notion of their obsolescence.

#### 2.3.6.4: Hierarchies and Innovation

Smith et al. (2017) and Bleiklie et al. (2015) investigate the role of hierarchies in navigating organizational change and innovation. Smith et al. examine the paradoxical role of hierarchical structures in simultaneously enabling stability and managing the complexities of innovation. Bleiklie et al., focusing on universities, explore how professional autonomy interacts with hierarchical control to address external pressures and internal demands. Diefenbach's theory is pivotal in both studies, offering a lens to analyze the tensions between stability and innovation and the mechanisms by which hierarchies evolve to balance these competing demands.

#### 2.3.6.5: Identity and Social Processes within Hierarchical Systems

Identity formation and social processes are also key areas where Diefenbach's theory has been influential. Costas and Grey (2014) analyze how hierarchical dynamics underpin secrecy and shape organizational identities, while Croft et al. (2014) investigate identity conflicts experienced by nurses transitioning into leadership roles. Both studies apply Diefenbach's insights to frame discussions on how hierarchical structures mediate identity, control, and interpersonal dynamics within organizations. These applications underscore the relevance of his theory in understanding the social dimensions of hierarchical systems.

#### 2.3.6.6: Summary for Diefenbach's discipline

Although the majority of research citing or utilizing Diefenbach's theory originates from the field of organizational management rather than political science, its interdisciplinary approach provides valuable insights that are highly relevant to political studies. One of Diefenbach's recent works, "Why Michels' 'Iron Law of Oligarchy' Is Not an Iron Law—and How Democratic Organisations Can Stay 'Oligarchy-Free'" (2019), exemplifies its applicability to political science. In this article, Diefenbach challenges Michels' assertion that oligarchization is an inevitable outcome of organizational development. He identifies specific factors and mechanisms that can prevent the concentration of power, thereby upholding democratic principles within organizations. This analysis directly engages with political science by addressing the internal dynamics of political organizations and exploring pathways to sustain democratic governance structures.

Furthermore, Diefenbach's influence extends into sociological research, including studies in the

Chinese context. Lewin, Kenney, and Murmann (2016, p. 77) cite Diefenbach's work to highlight the pressing issue of hierarchical persistence in Chinese society, stating: "Hierarchy and its negative consequences is arguably the most pressing social impact of China's invisible societal forces on its intended evolution." This observation underscores the relevance of Diefenbach's exploration of power relations and hierarchical systems in understanding the internal structures of political parties, government agencies, and union activities in China.

Diefenbach's theoretical framework, which addresses themes such as power dynamics, formal and informal structures, adaptability, and identity, offers a versatile tool for analyzing the complexities of hierarchical systems. In the context of Chinese politics, applying Diefenbach's theory to examine hierarchical systems and their influence provides a foundation for exploring the potential of union activities to challenge and transform these structures, drawing on Marxist perspectives. Therefore, employing Diefenbach's framework to analyze the Chinese hierarchical political system and assess opportunities for structural change through union activities is a well-grounded and compelling approach.

The following part will delve into a detailed discussion of Diefenbach's General Theory of Hierarchical Social Systems. It aims to answer questions about the persistence and potential collapse of hierarchical systems, offering insights into the Chinese hierarchical system and the development of collective voices in this context. The focus will shift to exploring why Diefenbach places ethical and moral development at the forefront, surpassing other factors.

### 2.3.7: Detailed Discussion of Diefenbach's Theory

Diefenbach (2013) asserts that social reality possesses a binary character. On one side, reality is objective and physically exists, encompassing concrete phenomena such as people and their behaviors, language and communication, the man-made material world and built environment, products and services, and abstract concepts conveyed through numbers and symbols, both written and otherwise conserved. Even without human presence, artifacts can still represent existing social reality. Conversely, social reality can be subjective, produced and reproduced by humans themselves. Natural phenomena or artifacts may carry distinct meanings for different individuals within specific historical contexts. As Diefenbach (2013, P43) puts it, "People perceive, interpret, shape, and even create social reality according to their social and cultural backgrounds, worldviews, experiences, emotions, and thoughts." In this shared understanding, hierarchical and non-hierarchical social structures conceived and created by people result from human cognition, as "the pyramid is well grounded in everybody's mind" (Laurent, 1978, P221).

This constitutes one of Diefenbach's core arguments for elaborating on what sustains hierarchy. He posits that hierarchy is a concept born from the human mind, promoting a binary comprehension of the world and consequently dividing people into superiors and subordinates. For any hierarchical system to emerge, the concept of hierarchy must first be conceived and reproduced in the mind, then reflected in behaviour and speech. "All external use of power and force; all silly 'pomp and circumstance' and ridiculous symbols and ceremonies, all ideological 'explanations' and 'justifications' of hierarchy, all actual attitudes and behaviours, as strongly and routinely held as they might be— all of these are only secondary compared to people's minds" (Diefenbach, 2013, P43). From this standpoint, comprehending the human mind becomes pivotal in addressing questions about hierarchy. How individuals perceive themselves and their surroundings profoundly influences their actions. To further tackle this inquiry, Diefenbach introduces the term "mindset" to encapsulate the intricacies of the human mind, dividing it into four elements for analysis: identity, interests, emotions, and moral character. This categorization hinges on three Western philosophical questions about understanding individuals and their roles and character within the world. These questions explore who individuals are, what they desire, and what actions they should take. Diefenbach adds a

fourth question, delving into how individuals feel, as he deems emotion a fundamental aspect of human existence. Now, let's delve into the specifics of these questions.

'Who am I?': How individuals perceive the world and respond to it is, to a large extent, shaped by their self-definition, i.e., their identity (Musson and Duberley, 2007; Elstak and Van Riel, 2005; Gabriel, 1999; Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Within human society, most individuals inherently rely on each other's existence and development, largely determined by their social identity as part of a group unit. The question of "who am I" is often synonymous with questioning one's social identity. Acceptance of one's social identity can be viewed as a facet of self-concept, "which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1978b, P63). Individuals' self-images are informed by their sociocultural background, position, character, rights, and responsibilities within a particular social system, implying that social identity is inseparable from social context and other participants (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007). Social identity, therefore, signifies a persistent and non-negotiable self-image within society, evolving according to situational contexts experienced by individuals (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

'What do I want?': In society, individuals often consciously or unconsciously engage with activities within the social system through their thoughts, expressions, and actions, irrespective of their societal roles and positions. When individuals or groups fixate on something, it denotes their "interest" in it (Darke and Chaiken, 2005; Hendry, 2005; Meglino and Korsgaard, 2004; Moore and Loewenstein, 2004; Miller, 1999; Suttle, 1987). Interest emerges when individuals or groups are drawn to certain objects or goals represented by that interest. Their interests serve as guides for their thinking patterns and subsequent actions (Meglino and Korsgaard, 2004; Hindess, 1986). Thus, interests represent a vital facet of individuals' mindsets.

'How do I feel?': Unlike the concept of interest, which often involves conscious and logical choices within the mindset, emotions encompass more spontaneous reactions that may be triggered by physical or neural changes (Lazarus, 1991; Hochschild, 1983; Kemper, 1978a). However, Kemper (1991, 1978a, 1978b) argues that emotions are not solely the outcomes of biological reactions but also the results of social power and status from a sociological perspective (Stets and Asencio, 2008). "Emotions result from a social context since it is mainly other actors who provide the positive and negative reinforcements in the course of interaction" (Kemper, 1978b, P31). This perspective highlights the role of emotions in the social dimension, encompassing phenomena such as anxiety due to redundancy, happiness following a successful project, anger towards a supervisor, or jealousy of a promoted coworker— all indicative of this emotional dimension within social interactions (Mignocac and Herrbach, 2004). As Scheff (2000, P84) contends, "emotions are a powerful force in the structure and change of societies," underscoring emotions' potential to influence reasoning and subsequent actions. Thus, the significant role of emotions in understanding social relationships, as proposed by Diefenbach, cannot be ignored.

'What should I do?': It is evident that everyone perceives the world and makes decisions based on notions of "right" and "wrong." People's thoughts and reactions to various phenomena are heavily influenced by their beliefs and values, encompassing ethical and moral codes. Individuals' moral character is their propensity to exhibit consistent moral behaviour across different situations (Pervin, 1994). Exploring individuals' ethical and moral distinctions helps predict their behaviour and social engagements. To gauge individual morality, Diefenbach recommends Kohlberg's moral stages theory (O'Fallon and Butterfield, 2005; Rahim et al., 1999; Maclagan, 1996; Crain, 1985; Kohlberg and Wasserman, 1980; Kohlberg and Hersh, 1977; Kohlberg, 1973).

When the binary concept of superiority and subordination becomes an explicit mindset, the hierarchical model automatically forms through social activities. By dissecting the mindset into identities, interests, emotions, and moral characters, I can thoroughly comprehend why hierarchy

functions, how it functions, and why it endures over time. As argued by Berger and Luckmann (1966), the mindset shapes our perception of the world and constructs reality through social interactions. Consequently, Diefenbach (2013, P45) concludes that “superiors and subordinates possess specific mindsets that can be analytically differentiated into identities, interests, emotions, and moral character.” He further contends that these components of the mindset drive and shape individuals' actions within social contexts, thereby engendering hierarchical social orders (Diefenbach, 2013). This perspective aligns with Giddens' s structuration theory (1984, 1976), where both theories recognize individuals' social practices as the pivotal intermediary between individuals and the social structure. However, Diefenbach advances the discourse by pinpointing the direct source of social action: the mindset that segregates people into superiors and subordinates. For the social practices that bolster and perpetuate the existing order, Giddens terms them “regular social practices,” whereas Diefenbach refers to them as “routine behaviour,” in contrast to deviant behaviour that could potentially challenge the established social order.

The four dimensions of the mindset are not isolated; rather, they are intertwined to elucidate the process of producing and reproducing social structure. Within a hierarchical system, if authoritarian individuals or groups address the question of ‘who they are’ by identifying as superior in society, they must also substantiate the ‘rightness’ of their presence in the superior position. This evolution prompts ethical and moral inquiries about ‘what they should do’ to validate their standing. As superiors, they must be ‘good’ or morally ‘right’ (I will later delve into how individuals define ‘good’ and morally ‘right’). Alternatively, they need to persuade subordinates that their privilege serves the broader societal interest. Emotions become the ultimate judgment of whether the benefits individuals receive from society translate into the anticipated happiness. All these processes necessitate fulfilment and maintenance through the routine behaviour of social actors; otherwise, the hierarchical social system will face challenges from the deviant behaviour stemming from these four dimensions.

#### 2.3.7.1: Routine Behaviour

Routine behaviour, as delineated in Diefenbach's theory, and regular social practices, as articulated in Giddens's theory, both appear to be fundamental sources of power for maintaining the system. In comparison to the more intricate cross-border and deviant behaviours, routine behaviours are less likely to cause disruptions. Howard-Grenville (2005) defines routine behaviour as encompassing repetitive actions or events aligned with the roles and positions of individuals within a hierarchical system, akin to accomplishing ‘missions’. These missions involve a combination of conscious and unconscious actions executed by social actors to meet the requirements of a given system, thereby sustaining its efficient functioning. Consequently, routine behaviours can be seen as embodiments of the internal logic and principles of social structures. Within a hierarchical system, the mission of superiors is to dominate and undertake essential distribution tasks, while subordinates' mission is to follow the directives of the dominant group and fulfil their requests. Achieving these missions holds significance for both groups, as they fulfil their anticipated roles and functions within society. Thus, through the daily routine behaviours of both superior and subordinate groups, the existence of the hierarchical system is legitimized and fortified, as Diefenbach contends: ‘Most of superiors’ and subordinates’ routine behaviour is about applying the prevailing principle of hierarchical systems— i.e., about carrying out their primary and related tasks to dominate and to obey, respectively.’

Drawing from orthodox management concepts, ensuring the efficiency and smooth operation of a hierarchical organization necessitates members aligning their behaviour with hierarchical principles. This safeguards against unexpected deviant or cross-border behaviours that could imperil the survival of the entire hierarchical system (Bennett and Robinson, 2000; Robinson and Bennett, 1995, 1997). In most cases, as posited by Diefenbach (2013), both superiors and subordinates recognize this and strive to uphold the system. Unlike the perspective of Sidanius and his colleagues in social dominance theory, Diefenbach (2013) argues that the dominant interplay between superiors and subordinates is

not an innate human instinct but is learned through widely expected and accepted routine behaviours.

In a hierarchical system, superiors must thoroughly comprehend the expectations placed upon them and how they should fulfil their roles through their work. By executing a series of missions and fulfilling their responsibilities, they can tangibly manifest their function and position as organizers or leaders. Scholarly summaries suggest that their primary tasks encompass defining and identifying problems, making decisions and influencing decision-making processes, setting objectives, planning, assigning, and organizing work, providing leadership and guidance, coordinating, communicating, motivating, and controlling, evaluating and appraising performance, and promoting, rewarding, and sanctioning (Braynion 2004; Jost and Hales 2002; Elsbach 2001; Jacques 1996; Mintzberg 1994; Lawler III 1988; Taylor 1967; Chandler 1962; Drucker 1954; Fayol 1949). Often, superiors are content to fulfil their responsibilities and meet the hierarchical social order's requirements (Grey 1999; Rosen 1984; Willmott, 1984), as highlighted by Biggert and Hamilton (1984, P546) in their research: 'the importance of obedience to role obligations as the route to power was described in numerous ways by actors. People often spoke of the importance of "honesty," "integrity," or "credibility" meaning the willingness to uphold the standards of the job'. Adhering to organizational rules and norms that fulfil public expectations guarantees and legitimizes the superior position and the continuity of authority (Courpasson and Dany, 2003). Thus, even if superiors cannot be entirely liberated from public scrutiny, adhering to routine behaviour strongly safeguards their position's legitimacy, reinforcing the hierarchical system.

For subordinate groups, their social roles also involve adhering to expected behaviours, which can be seen as aspiring to be 'good subordinates'. As subordinates, they must obey superiors' commands, adhere to existing rules and orders, and complete assigned tasks. According to Milgram's (1974) argument, this is not solely due to coercion, but also stems from their own willingness. Subordinates consistently engage in countless acts as 'rituals of subordination,' as anticipated by their superiors, ensuring the efficiency of the hierarchical system on a daily basis (Scott, 1990 P2; Thompson, 1961, P493). This phenomenon aligns with Sidanius et al.'s social dominance theory, suggesting that the hierarchical social order is rooted in human instinct. Sidanius and Pratto (1999) have argued that 'self-destructive and self-debilitating behaviours are the primary means by which subordinates actively participate in and contribute to their own continued subordination.' The unquestioning adherence to superiors and social roles through subordinate routine behaviours not only strengthens the existing rules and structure but also safeguards actors within the system (Jacques, 1996). This compliance ensures that they are deemed good members and immune to systematic punishment.

In conclusion, both superiors and subordinates play integral roles in creating and maintaining the hierarchical social order through routine social behaviours. However, in contrast to the perspective of social dominance theory, Diefenbach's stance diverges. He posits that hierarchy is not a manifestation of human nature but rather is acquired through learning, driven by the mindset (Diefenbach, 2013). Hence, the forthcoming section will delve into how the different dimensions of the mindset, encompassing interests, identities, emotions, and ethical characters, influence social actions, especially routine behaviours of individuals.

#### 2.3.7.1.1: Mindset: Interests

Scholars contend that the impetus behind social actions of both superiors and subordinates lies in their underlying interests (Darke and Chaiken 2005; O'Brien and Crandall 2005; Rutledge and Karim 1999). In a hierarchical system, the interests of individuals within superior groups are rooted in their elevated positions, pivotal functions, and designated responsibilities within the system. From a public standpoint, superiors' primary interest should be in serving the collective good. The survival and common interest of the entirety, whether pertaining to a country, nation, tribe, organization, or group, should take precedence for superiors (Deem and Brehony 2005; Pettigrew 2002; Burns 1961; Mills 1956). Many rulers within hierarchical systems often portray themselves as selfless, working solely for

the greater good (Diefenbach, 2013), as Willmott (1996, P326) contends: the 'privileged yet dependent positioning of managers within the industrial structure induces them to represent their work— to other workers and owners— as impartial and uncompromised by self-interest or class-interest, motivated only by seemingly universal virtues of efficiency and effectiveness.' However, this idealized view may not always align with reality.

It is important to recognize that not all superiors may fail to be qualified rulers fulfilling their roles; indeed, some may genuinely work in alignment with their required positions. However, due to their unique positions and the power they hold, many superiors may prioritize safeguarding their positions and the social resources associated with them, such as prestige, privileges, material benefits, career opportunities, and other life chances (Clegg and Walsh 2004; Willmott 1996; Zaleznik 1989; Rueschemeyer 1986). Over time, these superiors may become more focused on personal interests, rather than the affairs and prospects of the system. Fuelled by their considerable social power, such intentions can remain hidden from the public, resulting in the official representation of their interests differing markedly from their actual motivations. In some cases, such concealment might not even be necessary. Superiors who primarily prioritize their own interests are adept at framing their decisions and actions as driven by public interest, aligning with the norms, values, and even the laws and regulations of the social system (Diefenbach, 2013). With adequate power to access institutions, these individuals might even modify laws and regulations for the 'greater good.' By transmuting their personal interests into the 'public interest,' their true pursuits can masquerade as the common goal or 'general interest' of the system. Leveraging their personal or group interests as essential components and advocating for preferential treatment, privileged groups legitimize self-centred behaviours. Interestingly, both leaders and followers buy into this belief, akin to their faith in the hierarchical system. This phenomenon aligns well with both Diefenbach's and Giddens's theories, where hierarchy, represented through routine behaviours or regular social practices deeply ingrained over time, convinces everyone within the system that superiors can indeed represent the entire society, and that their interests equate to the broader societal interests (Diefenbach, 2013).

Within hierarchical systems, subordinates' interests also play a pivotal role in sustaining existing social dominance. To ensure that social subordinates contribute to the system's smooth operation, ongoing socialization processes, ranging from parental care to education, military service, religion, media, government, and business organizations, are orchestrated to foster a reliance on various routine behaviours that uphold the hierarchical system. Engels (1893) termed this phenomenon as 'false consciousness.' However, subordinates' decision-making processes are not entirely irrational. The system offers a spectrum of benefits that they lack at their present level, granted to 'good' subordinates who exhibit unwavering loyalty to superiors. These benefits encompass superior healthcare, access to valuable resources, privileges, and a sense of belonging (Diefenbach, 2013). Within this system, avenues outside the hierarchical structure are few and far between for subordinates to gain these advantages. Due to this 'brainwashing' effect stemming from routine behaviours, it becomes challenging for subordinates to derive benefits beyond the hierarchical system. The bulk of subordinates' interests is centred on reaping advantages through the system while avoiding punishment for deviant behaviour (Jost and Hunyady 2005; Hogg and Terry 2000; Beetham 1991; Milgram 1974, 1963). Consequently, defining subordinate behavior solely as a result of suppression, injustice, or threat is imprecise; it also entails spontaneous choices rooted in interest-driven orientations. For subordinates, relying on the system is simpler and more dependable than dismantling it in pursuit of advantages. 'It is much more advantageous for subordinates to pursue their individual goals and interests within, and according to the parameters set by, the system than to challenge it' (Diefenbach, 2013, P105). While striving for self-improvement and supplanting previous superiors might constitute the most viable deviant behavior for subordinates, the hierarchical system itself remains unchallenged (Diefenbach, 2013).

Overall, despite the substantial power discrepancy between superiors and subordinates leading to differing interests and pursuit processes within the system, their social actions, guided by interest

orientations, complement one another, maintaining the prevailing social hierarchy. Superiors safeguard the system, as most of their interests are guaranteed by positions granted by the system. Subordinates depend on the system for advantages, considering it the most pragmatic choice following interest calculations. Grounded in interest-oriented decision-making, the hierarchical system sustains seamless operation over time.

#### 2.3.7.1.2: Mindset: Identity

In a society, individuals' identity must align with the social system to which they belong. Within a hierarchical system, an individual's identity is predominantly shaped by their roles and positions, privileges and responsibilities, rights and duties, as well as interests and actions (Diefenbach, 2013). Concerning superiors, their official identity is epitomized by their elevated social status, which can be viewed as a charger, rule-maker, or even a guardian of order and control (Scott, 1990; Zaleznik, 1989). Effective leaders within this context should possess strong logical minds with decisive characters. Moreover, they may also require an enigmatic facet, such as intuition or a 'sixth sense,' which holds significance for superiors (Diefenbach, 2013; Coutu, 2005). This enigmatic element can elevate their power beyond mere logic, as reasoning can often act as a tool for subordinates to check the authority of their superiors. However, the inclusion of mysterious elements, often termed 'great wisdom,' effectively circumvents the constraints of logic, akin to Chinese emperors titling themselves as 'sons of the gods' to transcend human reasoning. Consequently, hierarchical systems face challenges in avoiding counterproductive outcomes due to this anti-intellectual consequence. Another approach to infuse this mystical character involves controlling information channels accessible to subordinates. When individuals are kept in the dark, following the lead of superiors becomes the best or only option available to them (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955). Within a hierarchical system, proficient superiors must juggle their roles as both reasoning overseers, monitoring subordinates, and as enigmatic mentors guiding the system's future trajectory.

Similarly, subordinates' identities are largely moulded by the logical order inherent in the hierarchy. By obediently following orders from superiors and partaking in routine activities as submissive servants, subordinates assimilate their identity as subordinates (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). A capable subordinate is one who perceives themselves as a performance-oriented machine with functional significance for the system. They rigorously adhere to the system's processes and willingly execute superiors' requests (Ashforth, 1994; Zaleznik, 1989). On a psychological level, subordinates' self-identity is often rooted in self-abasement toward superiors and institutions, further perpetuating their self-identity (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999). Bassman and London (1993) describe this as 'learned helplessness' resulting from simple, one-dimensional, or even infantile social identities. Subordinates' self-identity reinforces their low social status and powerless position, considered inevitable outcomes and requisites of the hierarchical system. Consequently, subordinates are less likely to 'take the initiative in social situations' (Van Vugt, 2006, P361). Ashforth (1994, P759) notes that subordinates in a hierarchy 'tend to be somewhat insecure, suspicious, authoritarian, dogmatic, and lower in ability, and tend to place a higher value on conformity and order, and a lower value on treating others with consideration.'

In summation, subordinates' acceptance of insecure and powerless identities underpins the identity of superiors as leaders and potent authorities. Their identities are interdependent and complementary, forming the crux of the hierarchical system. Individuals within this system scarcely entertain alternative social possibilities beyond hierarchy due to their unwavering affirmation of their own identities (Diefenbach, 2013). Even if other institutional alternatives exist, routine behaviours dissuade exploration, while their established identities hinder a genuine understanding of these alternatives.

#### 2.3.7.1.3: Mindset: Emotion

Emotion constitutes another dimension of people's mindset and acts as a driving force behind social

activities that give rise to and perpetuate hierarchical systems through social actions (Diefenbach, 2013). Diefenbach introduces this dimension with the argument that the reality of hierarchical social relationships is not solely reliant on conscious reasoning but also on unconscious aspects rooted in emotional responses. On one hand, emotions emerge as spontaneous reactions; on the other hand, emotions cannot be freely and casually expressed, particularly within hierarchical systems from a public perspective. Lurie (2004) emphasizes that emotions should align with specific situations. People experience emotions, which can be largely organized and managed based on their judgment of the context and others' expectations. Hierarchy inherently carries expectations regarding emotions from both superiors and subordinates. People's feelings and emotions to a great extent correspond to their social roles and positions. When subordinates encounter superiors, feelings of powerlessness and self-abasement due to their low social identity, as discussed in the preceding section, are difficult to evade. 'Whether they are superior or subordinate, all members of a hierarchical social system should have, and should show, (strong) feelings of belonging, duty, and responsibility' (Diefenbach, 2013, P107). In certain situations, people are expected to express specific emotions to align with the context (Diefenbach, 2013). For instance, a superior should display anger when subordinates fail to complete assigned tasks, while subordinates should laugh at their superior's jokes. These instances underscore the significance of emotions as a dimension of mindset in maintaining hierarchical systems. Emotion is perhaps the most apparent representation of hierarchical structure. Appropriate or inappropriate emotional expressions can also be classified as social actions, either routine or deviant behaviours.

For superiors operating within a conservative ideology, maintaining a 'professional' demeanour involves not exhibiting unwarranted emotion, but rather treating emotion as a tool to achieve their goals (Diefenbach, 2013). In essence, they must possess the ability to manage their emotions effectively. As superiors, they must strike a balance: on one hand, they should convey a sense of power compared to subordinates, projecting a rational demeanour; this aids in upholding their authority. On the other hand, they should also 'display and experience' emotions to come across as more relatable and approachable (Lurie, 2004, P8). This could involve expressing empathy, sympathy, and humour towards subordinates during ordinary times, or exhibiting anger and impatience when subordinates underperform. Such behaviour renders superiors more relatable and encourages motivation among subordinates (Lewis, 2000). Effective management of emotions not only entails regulating their expression but also accurately discerning and understanding subordinates' genuine feelings. Although it's acknowledged that emotions can be managed, this only occurs after authentic feelings have surfaced. Authentic emotions are often spontaneous reactions that cannot be controlled initially, akin to the fear of death. Therefore, in order to maintain dominance and control within a system, it is essential for superiors to first access the authentic emotional responses of their subordinates before attempting to manage or regulate those emotions (Rubin et al., 2005), which become the core area for management study.

Subordinates, often viewed as the 'hands' of the system, are expected to function like machines, devoid of emotions, especially avoiding anger or complaints over extended periods. Negative emotions can potentially lead to deviant behaviour and undermine the hierarchical system (Diefenbach, 2013). However, after decades of research into motivation and engagement, a realization has emerged that emotions among subordinates can play a pivotal role as 'invisible assets' with tangible outcomes such as increased productivity and profit, stemming from aspects of 'happiness' and 'satisfaction' (Mast et al. 2010; Johanson et al. 2001; Kaplan and Norton 1992). This evolved understanding of emotion also serves hierarchical systems by ensuring subordinates are content with their situation, persuading them that they reside in the happiest and safest environment worldwide. An example of this is the Chinese slogan from the Cultural Revolution era within a typical hierarchical system, suggesting that the entire world, except China, awaits emancipation as they suffer under the domination of capitalism (Lu, 2008). For subordinates, it's not only about cultivating feelings of inferiority and intimidation when facing superiors due to the repercussions of disobedience. They also strive to self-engage, displaying enthusiasm or even joy in the roles they play. These roles represent not just their work or jobs, but also their role as followers of superiors (Diefenbach, 2013).

In conclusion, both subordinates and superiors channel their emotions as routine behaviours to align with their roles and positions. Undoubtedly, this sustains the hierarchical system, with one group acting as followers and the other as leaders.

#### 2.3.7.1.4: Mindset: Ethical or Moral Character

Ethical or moral character constitutes the final dimension within the concept of mindset according to Diefenbach. Unlike the other dimensions we've discussed, Diefenbach places greater emphasis on ethics, considering it the most crucial dimension of mindset compared to the other three. As I have observed in my earlier discussions, the relationship between mindset and social actions resembles a circle: elements of mindset promote certain social actions that mirror them, and in turn, these social actions reinforce or replicate the elements of mindset. Throughout this process, the social system is either created or maintained. However, social actions can also serve as catalysts in this process, much like the age-old question of which came first, the egg or the chicken. When we delve into the creation of the original social system, it must be a reaction to human-led social activities that laid the foundation for the first system and segregated activities into routines or deviant behaviours, either preserving or compromising the system. As mere observers of nature and the world, we couldn't have possessed a socialized mindset before the system was established. We formulated the system based on our inclinations and aversions to reality, which created judgments for social activities towards nature, defining what's good and bad, right and wrong. This is where ethics stems from – it signifies how we comprehend the world and ourselves, subsequently guiding judgments, and decisions. Regarding the definition of ethics, numerous scholars converge on a similar notion: ethics is the path leading to positive outcomes such as happiness and utility (Mill, 1863), empathy and interconnectedness (Gilligan, 1982), virtue and goodness (MacIntyre, 1981), and a virtuous life according to Aristotle. Nussbaum (1986) defines ethics as the pursuit of human capabilities necessary for a dignified life. Hare (1952) offers a universal definition that positions ethics as the study of universalizable preferences. When these definitions are combined, ethics emerges as a guideline or methodology aligned with the system people believe in, enabling the realization of their preferred outcomes from reality. Therefore, individuals' ethical or moral character plays the most pivotal role in the process of regenerating the social system, in comparison to other dimensions of mindset. Unlike interests, identities, and emotions that can provide explanations for how a phenomenon occurs, ethical character is the sole dimension capable of explaining why it occurs. Diefenbach (2013, P110) underscores this by stating, 'notions about the moral characters of people and their (alleged) virtues and merits serve to explain and justify why people are where they are within the social system, why they deserve to be where they are, and why what they do routinely is right'. To use the example of a hierarchical system, the question of why superiors, functioning as pivotal subjects within the social structure, can occupy their positions or why they deserve to be there demands compelling and satisfactory reasons rooted in ethical preferences. Diefenbach (2013, P89) elucidates this point by asserting, 'ethics is an integral part of social reality.' According to Diefenbach's argument, any form of participation by individuals, whether direct or indirect, is not exempt from the influence of the ethical dimension. For individuals capable of decision-making, their capacity signifies not only their freedom but also the attached responsibility. Even within a highly regimented hierarchical system that nearly controls all public social activities, there are always niches where individuals can exert influence, as described by Scott (1990) as 'hidden transcripts'. This refers to 'discourse that takes place "offstage," beyond direct observation by power holders' (Scott, 1990, P4), particularly in hierarchical systems. This hidden transcript offers fertile ground for cultivating deviant thoughts and behaviours, potentially in opposition to the established hierarchy. It is also a realm for individuals to express themselves and take accountability for their actions, where their ethical judgment comes into play. 'There are always different options they can choose from' (Diefenbach, 2013, P89). Whether they opt to act or abstain, or how they choose to act, they must take responsibility for their choices. How individuals treat others, how they mould, nurture, and define themselves and their surroundings, and whether they adhere to or challenge societal norms and values – all these questions elucidate why they choose certain behaviours over others, reflecting their ethical inclinations. Diefenbach selects another perspective

from the human survival social conditions to further illuminate his argument. Every social reality result from human design and intervention. The diverse potentialities in social structure and order, shaped and upheld by social practices, imply ethical quandaries regarding how to construct and sustain the system and whether the system is morally right or wrong (Diefenbach, 2013). Given that specific realities are designed and unfolded by individuals, the question of whether the system's principles and mechanisms can be justified is only answerable through ethical judgment. Consequently, ethics is an integral facet of every social reality. In a hierarchical system, the public image of superiors holds significant importance; they must provide compelling reasons to convince both the public and themselves that they merit their positions higher up the social ladder. An explanation for this phenomenon can be found in Brookfield's description (2005, P47) – 'after all, if the fittest really do survive then the ones who are in positions of power must be there by virtue of their innate strength or superior intelligence since this has obviously allowed them to rise to the top.' To embody the title of 'superior,' they must possess an extraordinary range of competencies, unmatched leadership qualities, virtues that resonate with their character, and an unwavering demeanour – all of which are deemed necessary rhetoric to describe them (Groves and LaRocca 2011; Kark and Van Dijk 2007; Van Vugt 2006; Bass et al. 1987; Burns 1978). As leaders, they must embody these traits or at least align with the tenets of orthodox leadership ideologies (Diefenbach, 2013). They require skills, knowledge, and wisdom that surpass the capacities of ordinary individuals, enabling them to consistently make better decisions. They should also exhibit traits that demonstrate they work 'for the sake of the whole'. These attributes offer reasons for subordinates to follow superiors in achieving their goals. Those consciously constructing or upholding hierarchical systems are firm believers in the existence of these 'perfect human beings', and that ordinary individuals should surrender their social power to these exemplary rulers, allowing them to make all decisions concerning social matters based on their ethical judgments. Hence, superiors deserve their elevated social positions and accompanying responsibilities within the hierarchical system, coupled with the privileges of authoritarian power (Baker, 2005; Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002; Kezar and Eckel, 2002; Zammuto et al., 2000). Building on the discussions around ethics, which can be likened to the methodologies for their believed preferences, the hierarchical system itself also emerges from the beliefs stemming from preceding social activities. For subordinates, having relinquished their social power to make independent decisions, they embody the moral character of servants with an identity steeped in self-abasement in comparison to superiors. This posture is vital to sustaining the seamless functioning of the system. Their mission, responsibility, and even honor lie in fulfilling 'the whole's' expectations under the directive of 'perfect authority'. This parallel can be drawn to instances of religion and nationalism, where individuals adopt roles like 'true believers' or 'loyal soldiers', or more recent phenomena like managerialism and neoliberalism, where they embrace labels like 'dedicated workers' or 'confident consumers' (Diefenbach, 2013). Despite the potential for exploitation in this asymmetrical power dynamic between superiors and subordinates, the resulting scepticism among subordinates does not always find factual evidence. This is due to the fact that their surroundings are artificially created and nurtured based on dominant ideologies. People cannot challenge the hierarchy as long as they hold onto the ethics propagated by the hierarchical system. Furthermore, a range of promises, threats, rewards, and punishments makes individuals reconsider any potential deviant behaviour. As Diefenbach (2013) describes subordinates (2013, P111), they 'ought' to possess a strong sense of belonging – meaning they should feel fortunate and content to be part of the hierarchical system that renders them subordinates. To uphold the hierarchy, superiors craft specifically designed ethical or moral ideals that underscore the significance of obedience, legitimizing subordination and encouraging effective performance for the system (Stoddart, 2007; Courpasson and Dany, 2003; Scott, 1990; Burnham, 1941). In summary, both superiors and subordinates persuade themselves through ethics, underlining the significance of the hierarchical system as a means of realizing their desired reality. Through routine behaviours that bolster the reasoning and realism of hierarchical ethics, the system perpetuates and reproduces itself. However, if you recall my comparison between Diefenbach's theory and Giddens's structuration theory, you may have noticed that Giddens overlooks the potential for deviant behaviour that could potentially undermine the social system. This also presents an opportunity for the complete collapse of the hierarchical system, a topic I will explore in the next session.

### 2.3.7.2: The Cross-Border Behaviour

I have extensively discussed the pivotal role of routine behaviour in creating and perpetuating hierarchical systems through mindset dimensions. Alongside routine behaviours, there exists another category of social actions that do not function as tools to uphold the system. These behaviours are referred to by Diefenbach as 'cross-border' or 'cross-boundary' behaviours. While not all of these deviant behaviours directly pose threats to the entire hierarchical system, the ethics or values embodied by these behaviours, which challenge existing norms or principles, can potentially evolve into significant threats to the system over time.

Differing from routine behaviours, which largely transpire within established boundaries, cross-border behaviours consciously or unconsciously breach these boundaries that function as standards or rules within a social setting (Jary and Jary, 2005). Social boundaries are often established based on whether certain actions are permissible, appropriate, and acceptable according to both formal and informal aspects of social norms (Andersson and Pearson, 1999). Diefenbach (2013, P50) defines 'norms' as akin to 'common beliefs' that unite people towards a shared objective. These 'boundaries,' established on these 'norms,' demarcate people from their behaviours and worldviews, particularly within hierarchical systems. These boundaries symbolize 'social and cultural barriers between dominant elites and subordinates' (Scott 1990, P132). They not only delineate different functions and social positions between superiors and subordinates, but also confine their social responsibilities and privileges. People's mindsets, behaviours, and even attitudes are significantly shaped by these boundaries (Diefenbach, 2013). The smooth operation of a hierarchical system hinges largely on the widespread acceptance, compliance, and confirmation of these boundaries, at least from a formal and public perspective. This acceptance prompts individuals to constrain their actions to maintain their social positions and fulfil the expectations of the social system (Biggart and Hamilton, 1984), effectively legitimizing the system's existence, at least in the public sphere.

However, there's also a hidden realm, often obscured from public view or at least from the 'other side.' I touched upon this when discussing personal freedom within a hierarchical system – individuals always retain choices and responsibilities for themselves. Scott (1990) characterizes this hidden realm as a space where individuals can truly express themselves. Concealing certain behaviours from the observation of powerholders can be seen as necessary for the system, as these behaviours could otherwise disrupt or challenge social order. The purpose of these existing boundaries goes beyond segregating people by their social positions, responsibilities, and privileges; they also establish a distinction between the public and hidden domains for both superiors and subordinates. Following Scott's argument (1990), cross-border behaviour can be defined as thoughts and actions originating in the hidden domain that traverse into the public domain. In most cases, these thoughts and actions challenge prevailing norms or even encourage others to partake in specific social situations (Diefenbach, 2013). According to Diefenbach (2013), these boundary-crossing actions can involve all the dimensions of mindset, leading to various forms of conscious and unconscious social actions. Unconscious cross-border behaviours might encompass inappropriate laughter in a sombre situation or publicly venting anger towards one's boss. Such behaviours are not necessarily tied to disagreement with prevailing societal norms; rather, they often reflect a loss of emotional control. However, conscious cross-border behaviour tells a different tale, possessing the potential to significantly destabilize the existing social system.

Conscious deviant behaviour typically follows a sequence of mindset dimensions that subsequently translate into social actions. It begins with negative emotions or sentiments. As previously explored, emotions can be managed and controlled, but only to a certain extent, primarily through existing passive mental reactions. While it's easier to mask emotions at the surface, it's challenging to fully control the feelings stemming from basic human reactions. A human being will inevitably feel pain when cut by a knife. These negative emotions prompt individuals to scrutinize the routine activities they engage in daily and consequently question the norms and ethics supporting these routines.

However, these norms and ethics are not easy to challenge, especially considering the prolonged 'brainwashing' through daily routines. Many deviants won't forsake the prevalent social values; instead, they seek solutions within the framework of current ethical values. These behaviours can also be categorized as cross-boundary, such as openly rebelling against superiors or participating in union resistance activities in Western societies. However, these behaviours tend to have little impact on challenging or significantly influencing the existing hierarchical system (Diefenbach, 2013). This is because their concerns typically revolve around their interests and social positions rather than questioning the system itself. This phenomenon is understandable; hierarchical ethics or moral standards can be incredibly persuasive, often leading people to tolerate their current hardships. Drawing from Haidt's psychological research (2012), ethical principles linked to positive emotions are more likely to be internalized and acted upon by individuals. Conversely, if ethical principles are detached from positive emotions and rely solely on abstract reasoning or rules, they may be less compelling and easier to disregard or forget. However, hierarchical ethics have strategies to circumvent this problem. One example that illustrates this strategy is the concept of working diligently not because one enjoys it, but due to the promise of a brighter future. This mirrors the principles of the hierarchical system, where suffering is often described as a temporary inconvenience, much like how the Soviet newspaper depicted it. This is why individuals within a hierarchical system need rewards for their enduring loyalty and consistent routine behaviours. However, if these rewards are delayed or do not meet expectations, doubt regarding the prevailing ethical principles may emerge. Yet, doubt is not the only consequence; individuals may seek to replace the current superiors, defining them as inadequate leaders. However, this does not necessarily point to a problem with the hierarchical system and its underlying ethical code. When individuals begin questioning the ethics of the hierarchical system, they subsequently question other dimensions of mindset. They doubt their social identity and ponder why there should be superiors and subordinates. They also question the process of achieving their interests, pondering whether they are pursuing their true desires or goals imposed upon them. This progressive questioning process poses a real challenge to the hierarchical system. However, these challenges don't arise instantly. As Scott (1990) suggests, deviant thoughts or attitudes may initially emerge from the hidden domain, away from the sight of powerholders. This hidden domain provides protection for these deviants and offers them a chance to accrue social power. In the face of authorities wielding considerable social power that others cannot match, real threats posed by deviants are not recklessly exposed. Yet, their existence remains a latent time bomb for the hierarchical system as a whole.

According to Diefenbach (2013), all mindset dimensions can exert an impact in motivating deviant social actions. However, for a profound and lasting challenge to hierarchical systems, ethics and moral considerations are the sole dimensions that can significantly contribute to it. Based on his perspective, interests- and emotions-oriented cross-border activities can merely generate fleeting effects on the system. When immediate circumstances linked to their interests change or emotional intensity diminishes, the impetus to challenge the hierarchy may dwindle.

Regarding identity-oriented deviant activities, despite similar social traits among different identity groups leading to shared experiences, political pursuits, and interests culminating in collective actions, the divergence originating from their social identities exacerbates the difficulty of their organization. This renders them susceptible to fragmentation. A solitary social identity group, especially one with an unempowered social standing, finds it arduous to genuinely jeopardize the system. Their societal function could be supplanted by another identity group should superiors perceive it necessary. Following the economic reforms, China's traditional urban working class was gradually replaced by rural migrant workers—often referred to as the new working class—who became the primary labour force in the expanding private sector (Pun, 2005).

Unlike other dimensions of thought and behaviour, ethical considerations serve as a foundational framework that informs and shapes all other cognitive orientations and social actions (Diefenbach, 2013). This foundational role enables ethics-driven activities to garner broader support and participation, while also enhancing their resilience against co-optation or manipulation (Diefenbach,

2013; Kohlberg, 1973). These activities grapple with fundamental inquiries regarding what is deemed right or wrong. Even amidst diverse social identities and varied pursuits of interest, individuals remain inclined to engage in such activities because they are morally justifiable. Hence, the genuine challenge to the hierarchy involves persuading others to repudiate the notion that hierarchy can serve as a conduit to justice, equity, human dignity, and other ethical aspects aligned with human nature. The objective is then to establish a new egalitarian system to supplant the former one.

The scholars He and Su (2018) who focused on contentions against Chinese authoritarian regime provide a similar conclusion. From their research, they summarized factors that maintain the power of Chinese authority and make them almost invulnerable. Based on their argument, value and belief that shared by public play a crucial role in it. According to the argument from He and Su (2018), three reasons can explain the resilience of the authoritarian regime to Chinese social contentions. First, most of the social contentions are oriented toward personal interests and are limited to a small geographical area. In most cases, these conventions are triggered by violations of participants' interests by local government actions. On one hand, only a fraction of the regime apparatus is questioned, and the fundamental aspects of the regime remain untouched. On the other hand, the geographical limitations mean that the conventions only affect one village or town. Participants in these conventions rarely consider diffusion. In this context, such contentions are unlikely to shake up the pillars of the authoritarian system that the regime supports. Second, most of the protestors do not question the legitimacy of the Chinese authoritarian political system. Based on the argument from O'Brien (2005), the official ideology has always been regarded as a basis for their claims. As Li (2004) mentioned, Chinese interest-oriented protestors often show low trust in the local government but high trust in the central government. This phenomenon is often explained by the administrative hierarchical system designed by the Chinese regime, in which local governments play the role of dealing with specific issues as the "bad cop," while the central government presents itself as the "good cop" that stays away from any problems and positions itself as the source of justice (Cai, 2008). Many Chinese citizens hold a positive view of the central government. In the Chinese authoritarian system, holding a positive view of the central government helps legitimize the inequality of society and the powerless position of Chinese citizens. With this opinion, people reach a sense of mental satisfaction, believing that their situation is not bad because those in authority will always be by their side. This perspective based on belief from the Chinese people gives credit to the regime, which appears to be against authoritarianism on the surface but actually depends on authoritarianism internally. Third, the regime has enough institutional and financial capacity to handle daily contentions. For example, petition requests are directly sent to petition bureaus at different levels of government, waiting to be processed. Other issues, such as protests, strikes, and demonstrations, which are considered illegal activities in the Chinese law system, fall under the responsibility of the police bureaus. Most of the time, the repressive actions by the police bureaus are efficient. With extensive experience in dealing with daily contentions, the government has developed standardized procedures to disperse mass gatherings. Based on the argument from Su and other scholars (2013), the Chinese regime has established a stability-maintenance system to prevent contentions and reduce their negative influence. Moreover, as the world's second-largest economy, China has sufficient financial support to handle challenges to the authoritarian system, both in terms of petition requests and other resistance activities such as protests or strikes. According to the argument from Smith (2010), the disappearance of rural contentions that were once severe across the nation was driven by the economic development of the Chinese economy, which enabled the government to abolish agricultural taxes and most of the other relevant levies within five years. With the support of developing institutional and financial capacity, posing a long-lasting threat to the stability of the regime becomes difficult.

However, according to the argument from He and Su (2018), the social contentions can still pose a real threat to the authoritarian regime and hierarchical system if they are value-oriented social activities. Participants in these activities are not primarily driven by their material interests but by the belief that something is not "right." Although the trigger of contentions is often interest-oriented, their goals must be value-oriented, with motives stemming from dissatisfaction with the system or even societal values. Some value-oriented conventions may not directly threaten the authoritarian regime,

such as the fight for human rights, religious freedom, judicial transparency, or environmental public goods. The reason for their inefficacy is as mentioned above—they still largely rely on authority. For example, human rights lawyers must rely on their qualifications, which need approval from the Chinese official (the Ministry of Justice). Similarly, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) must maintain official registrations with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and their fundraising and employment activities are also subject to the discretion of various government departments. With acquiescence from the authorities, the conventions organized by NGOs cannot go too far and often have to limit themselves in both claims and actions. In this context, the regime is unlikely to be threatened by the power of these conventions, and even if "accidents" do occur, it is easy to punish the "troublemakers." However, while this kind of convention may not pose a significant harm to the authoritarian regime, it indirectly influences the public by challenging the legitimacy of the authoritarian and hierarchical values. On the other hand, if the organizers and participants of a convention not only hold anti-hierarchical values but also do not rely on the system of the authoritarian regime, it becomes a real issue that may shake the foundations of the regime. According to the argument from Pei (2003), contentious activities in China can be divided into "ordinary resistance," which is interest-oriented, and "dissident resistance," which is value-oriented, since 1989. The former resistance typically involves ordinary people fighting for specific interests, while the latter involves more intellectual activists pursuing political rewards. Based on the argument from He and Su (2018), in the Chinese context, some late resistance activities can be identified as political dissidence, but as their claims and actions directly challenge the fundamental interests of the regime, they can still be regarded as anti-system contentions, such as the Deng Yujiao incident and the Sun Zhigang incident. In summary, real anti-system contentions that target the authoritarian system need to be independent from the authority, with anti-hierarchical values as their motivation.

The essential role of ethics and value consideration in Diefenbach's theory explains why he believes his theory can be used in cross-cultural research. Although different cultures share distinct ethical preferences in constructing social structures, all ethics play a similar role in guiding human social activities. Comparing different ethical considerations across cultures aids our comprehension of each social system's rationale and enables us to predict their potential future trajectories. Ultimately, all social systems must align with the reality preferences of their respective cultures, and these preferences share common ground across all cultures, reminding us that despite differing characteristics, we are all humans capable of understanding each other (Maslow, 1954).

In the academic realm of moral development, Kohlberg (1973) proposed a theory of moral stage development that can elucidate the process through which people can truly transcend hierarchy (Diefenbach, 2013). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that Kohlberg's theory is rooted in Western society and identifies moral development stages corresponding to the elimination process of hierarchical systems. For this research, I am focusing on the resistance activities in the style of unions within the Chinese context. While the Chinese context, with its cultural distinctiveness compared to the Western world, cannot be disregarded, the concept of union-based resistance activities is rooted in Western culture. As I have discussed based on Diefenbach's theory, ethics consideration is deemed the fundamental driver in the social construction process, driven by humans seeking answers to why particular systems are constructed. Union activities in Western society also emanate from the ethical character of individuals in the West who reason in favour of such activities. To comprehend the feasibility of establishing independent and functional unions based on the Western definition within the Chinese context, I must ascertain whether Chinese people, specifically the working class, share similar ethical considerations with the West that support union activities. Without these shared ethical considerations, social activities originating from different cultural backgrounds may appear analogous on the surface but differ fundamentally in essence. Kohlberg's theory assists me in identifying key ethical codes relevant to union activities, which in turn helps determine whether Chinese workers hold these ethical codes, thus predicting the potential for future collective expression in the Chinese context.

Of course, numerous other ethical or moral development theories are potentially applicable to

hierarchical systems, such as Rest's four-component model of moral behaviour (1986), which posits moral behaviour as involving four components: moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character. Another example is MacIntyre's virtue ethics (1981), which emphasizes the cultivation of virtuous character traits as the bedrock of ethical behaviour. Additionally, Haidt's moral foundation theory (2012) provides insights into the moral values underpinning individuals' acceptance or rejection of hierarchical systems. However, all these theories do not address the possibility of eliminating hierarchical systems. They can aid in understanding hierarchical systems but do not offer explanations for why and how they come into being. Hence, this research selects Kohlberg's theory to identify the key ethical codes for union activities and subsequently determine if Chinese workers share similar codes as their Western counterparts.

### 2.3.8: Kohlberg's theory discipline

Kohlberg's moral stage theory, while offering significant advantages for analyzing hierarchical systems and being strongly endorsed by Diefenbach (2013) for such inquiries, warrants critical examination regarding its applicability to sociological research due to its psychological origins. The theory provides a structured, stage-based framework that progresses from self-interest in moral reasoning to adherence to universal principles such as justice and equality (Kohlberg, 1973). Particularly in its later stages, Kohlberg's emphasis on social contracts and moral universality resonates with sociological concerns about the interaction between individual agency and societal structures.

The cross-disciplinary potential of Kohlberg's theory is supported by Snarey's (1985) review of studies examining its cross-cultural applicability. Snarey demonstrated that moral development reflects how individuals negotiate societal norms within their cultural contexts, thereby extending the relevance of Kohlberg's framework beyond psychology to sociological research. Further advancing this connection, Rest (1986) expanded upon Kohlberg's work by arguing that moral development serves as a bridge between individual cognition and societal expectations. Rest emphasized the dynamic interaction between individuals and institutional or cultural norms as they navigate ethical dilemmas, further solidifying the theory's applicability in exploring the sociological dimensions of morality.

#### 2.3.8.1: Critique on Kohlberg's theory and its further application

Kohlberg's moral stage theory has been both influential and widely critiqued since its introduction. While it provides a robust framework for understanding the development of moral reasoning, two key criticisms have been repeatedly raised: questions about its universality (Shweder et al., 1997) and its applicability across genders and cultures (Gilligan, 1982). These critiques have prompted significant refinements and defenses of the theory, which have ultimately reinforced its relevance to both psychological and sociological research.

One primary critique concerns the universality of Kohlberg's stages. Shweder et al. (1997) argued that the higher stages of Kohlberg's framework, particularly those emphasizing individual autonomy and universal principles, reflect a Western, individualistic bias and fail to account for the communal and relational moral frameworks predominant in collectivist cultures. In many non-Western societies, for instance, communal harmony and adherence to traditional norms often take precedence over abstract principles such as justice and equality. These observations suggest that Kohlberg's model may not fully capture the moral reasoning processes of diverse cultural groups.

In contrast, Snarey (1985) conducted a pivotal cross-cultural review to evaluate the universality of Kohlberg's theory. Examining over 45 empirical studies conducted in 27 countries, including both industrialized and non-industrialized societies, Snarey found that the structural progression through Kohlberg's stages—from pre-conventional to conventional and then to post-conventional levels—remained consistent across cultures. This finding supports the notion that the cognitive processes

underlying moral development are universal, even if their cultural expressions differ.

However, Snarey acknowledged significant cultural variations in the content of moral reasoning. For example, at the conventional level, collectivist societies often emphasized communal harmony and family obligations, while Western societies prioritized individual rights and social contracts. Similarly, at the post-conventional level, moral reasoning in some cultures was informed by spiritual or religious principles, as opposed to secular notions of justice. Despite these differences, Snarey argued that such cultural variations do not challenge the fundamental structure or validity of Kohlberg's stages. Instead, they represent diverse yet reasonable manifestations of the same cognitive processes.

These findings highlight that the differing moral priorities of collectivist and individualistic societies—such as a focus on group cohesion versus individual autonomy—ultimately reflect a shared commitment to fostering sustainable and harmonious social communities. While the logic and expression of moral reasoning vary across cultures, they align with the core principles of Kohlberg's stages. Therefore, the observed cultural differences do not undermine the theory's structural consistency but rather enrich its application by demonstrating its adaptability to diverse social contexts.

Another famous critique to Kohlberg is from Gilligan. Carol Gilligan's (1982) critique of Kohlberg's moral stage theory centers on its perceived gender bias. She argued that Kohlberg's emphasis on justice-based reasoning neglects the relational and care-oriented moral reasoning more commonly associated with women. In response, she proposed the "ethic of care" as an alternative framework, highlighting the importance of relationships and context-dependent decision-making in moral reasoning. This critique brought attention to the potential limitations of Kohlberg's theory in capturing the full spectrum of moral development.

However, Walker (1989) conducted research that challenged the notion of an inherent gender divide in moral reasoning. His study demonstrated that both men and women employ justice- and care-based reasoning, depending on the specific nature of the moral dilemma. Walker argued that moral reasoning strategies are influenced more by the context of the dilemma than by the gender of the individual. This finding suggests that justice- and care-based reasoning are not mutually exclusive or confined to one gender but rather serve as complementary approaches that individuals utilize based on situational demands.

Walker's findings affirm the validity of Kohlberg's justice-oriented framework within its domain, particularly in contexts where principles such as fairness, rights, and justice are central. At the same time, his research supports the integration of care-based reasoning as a complementary perspective, broadening the applicability of Kohlberg's theory. Consequently, while Gilligan's critique raises important considerations, Walker's work suggests that Kohlberg's framework is not inherently biased and remains suitable for studying moral development across genders. These findings underscore the adaptability of Kohlberg's theory, not only in cross-cultural contexts but also in addressing concerns of gender bias, reaffirming its value as a versatile tool for analyzing moral reasoning.

Kohlberg's moral stage theory, though developed in the mid-20th century, remains a foundational framework for analyzing moral development across disciplines, including sociology. Recent studies demonstrate its continued relevance, with applications extending into education, technology ethics, and cultural contexts such as China (Carmichael et al., 2018; Kiser et al., 2009; Zhang and Zhao, 2017). While critiques of its universality and abstraction persist, scholars have adapted Kohlberg's stages to address contemporary challenges, reaffirming its value in understanding moral reasoning and its interaction with societal structures.

Recent studies highlight Kohlberg's enduring relevance in moral education and ethical decision-

making. Carmichael et al. (2018) employed Kohlberg's theory in a classroom activity designed to engage students in understanding moral reasoning. By integrating real-world moral dilemmas with Kohlberg's six stages, the study showcased the theory's utility in encouraging students to reflect on diverse moral perspectives. While acknowledging critiques of Kohlberg's reliance on hypothetical scenarios, the authors enhanced the theory's practical relevance by incorporating real-life cases. This adaptation underscores how Kohlberg's framework can be modernized to resonate with contemporary audiences, making it a valuable tool for analyzing moral development in structured educational settings.

Similarly, Kiser et al. (2009) applied Kohlberg's stages to evaluate moral reasoning in the context of technology ethics. Using scenarios related to data privacy and intellectual property, the researchers measured how students reasoned about ethical dilemmas and categorized their responses according to Kohlberg's framework. Their findings revealed that most participants operated at conventional levels of moral reasoning, emphasizing societal norms and rules (Stages 3 and 4). The study also highlighted the rarity of post-conventional reasoning (Stages 5 and 6), reflecting broader challenges in fostering higher-order moral reasoning. Despite these limitations, the authors affirmed the theory's relevance in understanding ethical decision-making in contemporary fields such as information technology.

Zhang and Zhao (2017) provide a particularly compelling example of Kohlberg's theory applied within the Chinese context. Their study analyzed moral education practices in Chinese colleges, using Kohlberg's stages to propose a shift from obedience-based instruction to approaches fostering autonomous moral reasoning. The authors highlighted the challenges of adapting Kohlberg's framework to collectivist societies, where communal harmony and family obligations often take precedence over individual rights and social contracts. At the conventional level, for instance, Chinese students demonstrated reasoning rooted in familial and societal expectations, reflecting cultural norms distinct from those in Western contexts.

Despite these differences, Zhang and Zhao emphasized the theory's adaptability. They argued that Kohlberg's stages could be integrated with contextual pedagogical methods, to bridge the gap between universal cognitive structures and culturally specific moral content. This application demonstrates that Kohlberg's theory is not limited to Western societies but can be adapted to analyze moral reasoning in diverse cultural settings. By using Kohlberg's framework to explore moral development in China, the study underscores the theory's cross-cultural relevance and its potential for informing sociological research on moral education in non-Western contexts.

These studies collectively affirm the continued relevance of Kohlberg's moral stage theory in sociological research. They demonstrate that, while the theory is rooted in psychological traditions, its structured progression provides valuable insights into how individuals and societies negotiate moral dilemmas. In particular, the study by Zhang and Zhao highlights how Kohlberg's theory can be applied in collectivist societies, where moral reasoning often reflects communal values rather than individual autonomy. This application underscores the theory's flexibility and its potential for examining the interplay between individual cognition and societal norms across diverse cultural settings.

After discussing the disciplinary foundations of Kohlberg's moral stage theory, the next section will focus on the details of the theory and its application in my research.

### 2.3.9: Hierarchy acceptance and Kohlberg's moral stage theory

The theory of moral development stages from Kohlberg's (1973) provides insight into building a non-hierarchical system and offers a potential solution for unions. According to Kohlberg's theory (1973),

he divided people into six moral value stages, ranging from the bottom to the top: punishment-and-obedience orientation, instrumental-relativist orientation, law and order orientation, social-contract orientation, and universal-ethical-principal orientation. Each orientation represents the predominant moral character of individuals and the moral principles that guide their actions. From Kohlberg's theory, I can understand where hierarchical values originate from and when hierarchy will automatically disappear as individuals undergo moral development. Based on Diefenbach's argument (2013), people in different moral stages exhibit different tendencies in accepting hierarchical social order. For instance, individuals in the first stage, the punishment-and-obedience orientation, have the highest level of acceptance of hierarchical order compared to other stages and be named as pre-conventional level of ethical development with stage two. According to Kohlberg (1973), individuals in this stage value avoiding punishment and unquestioningly deferring to power. They have little respect for the underlying moral order in society and only function within the workplace due to fear. They feel comfortable in hierarchical organizations with clear formal rules, guidelines, and authoritarian management. These individuals are accustomed to being followers even in decentralized societies, and they support processes with hierarchical order, even if they are part of the subordinate group. Furthermore, individuals with obedient personalities are power-oriented and seek power and social dominance as their main pursuit. Their desire for power often leads them to take advantage of social movements and revolutions, using them as opportunities to gain dominance as change agents within organizations or leaders of social movements (Diefenbach, 2013). Driven by their strong desire for power, they choose an authoritarian management style and prefer environments with hierarchical social relationships. But as I have discussed about hierarchical system, there are little opportunity for subordinate to achieve real power within the system. In most of the time, the people in this stage as subordinates define their position as submissive servant to conform, obey and follow orders for the sake to avoid negative sanctions (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Merton, 1961).

Individuals in the second stage, the instrumental-relativist orientation, exhibit a calculative selfishness value (Kohlberg, 1973). These individuals are less influenced by the fear of authority and have a less exclusive desire for power but expand their pursuit to seek various individual advantages. This stage is closely linked to financialization, as discussed in the previous chapter. Like the first stage, their pursuits still revolve around their objectives fuelled by selfish values (Crain, 1985; Kohlberg, 1973). According to Boddy's summary (2006) of individuals with calculative selfishness values, they lack conscience and are incapable of understanding others' feelings. However, their calculative mindset makes them more likely to be hired, promoted, and manipulative. They are willing to put others down without concern for their well-being. Like individuals in the first stage, their high level of desire to pursue their interests makes them astute and flexible. These characteristics help them climb the hierarchical ladder by gaining advantages through competition and exploitation in a hierarchical system, even in a less formalized hierarchical society. They can unintentionally or intentionally perpetuate hierarchical relationships within an organization or society (Diefenbach, 2013). Same as the first stage, their self-service value for power, privileges, and prerogatives makes hierarchical system become the only place they can achieve these advantages. Therefore, Kohlberg (1973) concludes these two stages as pre-conventional level of moral development who only focus on external consequence and self-interest. Kohlberg defines first two stages of moral development as pre-conventional level as both of them guide their behaviour based on self-service ethics.

In contrast to the first and second stages, individuals in stages three and four hold different expectations for themselves and the society they live in, which be named as conventional level (Kohlberg, 1973). These stages represent values that demonstrate a social conscience. Individuals in stage three, the interpersonal concordance good boy nice girl orientation, are concerned about meeting the majority's expectations and behaving in a socially acceptable manner (Kohlberg, 1973). It indicates the importance of good interpersonal social relationship from demonstration of 'good behaviours' toward others (Kohlberg, 1973). It is the essential character for people to unite each other for common goal or fight justice for others even if the problem may not directly relate to them. The problem lies in how 'good' is defined. Individuals in this stage tend to conform to stereotypes, which may pose risks when challenging hierarchical norms. For example, in an authoritarian society, the

definition of 'good' behaviour would be based on hierarchical principles. Nevertheless, compared to the previous two stages, individuals in stage three still oppose authoritarian norms. The key characteristic of this stage is care for others and approval of "natural" behaviour (Kohlberg, 1973). They value virtue and high ethical standards, which naturally united each other. In an authoritarian society, empathy, and care for one's surroundings are not welcomed, as grassroots solidarity may weaken top-down propaganda. An atomized society is easier to dominate, as the sense of individualism and isolation can make it easier for power structures, including governments and corporations, to exert control over people (Bauman,2000). Therefore, although the people in stage three do not specifically against hierarchical system, there are still not welcome to the system as they may potentially gain their social power to against superiors. For stage three, it can unquestionably be seen as a significant improvement from stages one and two.

Similar criticism applies to the next stage. Individuals in stage four, the law-and-order orientation expand their care from interpersonal level into institutional level. They hold great respect for authority, rules, and regulations, aiming for a harmonious society free from harm (Kohlberg, 1973). They emphasize duty, order, and respect for authority. Kohlberg distinguishes this stage from stages one and two by stating that "the attitude is not only one of conformity to personal expectation and social order but of loyalty to it, of actively maintaining, supporting, and justifying the order" (Kohlberg, 1973, p.499). The authority they follow should base on the principles of care and peace to the whole society. However, it is challenging for individuals in a hierarchical system to define whether laws or order from authority can really fulfil the principles. For example, superiors may block the negative information but only release the positive one to deceive public. Same as the people in stage three, they will not directly against hierarchical system. Nevertheless, their concern for collective norms such as family, friends, group membership, and whole society differentiate them from individuals in stages one and two. Their justification of social rules makes superiors must be careful about their public behaviour and meticulously hide their selfish intentions.

Then there are the postconventional level of moral development including stage five and six. Individuals in stage five, the social-contract orientation, believe that right behaviour should align with individual rights and be based on critical examination and approval from the social norms. They emphasize the importance of procedural rules in reaching a consensus (Kohlberg, 1973). Right behaviour should be based on individual rights, and any social standards should be criticized and approved by society. The relativism of personal values should be recognized, and procedural rules should be established to reach a consensus (Kohlberg, 1973). Legal perspectives are crucial in this stage, as are considerations of social utility and the possibility of change in existing social orders. Outside the legal realm, agreements and contracts become necessary for obligations (Kohlberg, 1973). As Crain (1985, P123) says, 'Stage 5 respondents basically believe that a good society is best conceived as a social contract into which people freely enter to work toward the benefit of all.' The most notable characteristic of this stage is the emphasis on personal values and opinions, which strongly opposes authoritarianism and hierarchical principles. In an authoritarian culture, collectivism is essential for mind control, making individuals question their own feelings and judgments while providing an ideal environment for propaganda. Compared to the previous two stages, stage five represents a clear inclination towards decentralization and empiricism, which are essential moral principles in democratic governments and constitutions (Kohlberg, 1973). Stage five demonstrates a powerful force that opposes authoritarian values and welcomes collective negotiation to build consensus through society. However, according to Diefenbach (2013), a completely egalitarian social system without any form of hierarchy may not be easy to be achieved through this stage of ethics. Although the people in this stage have great motivation to build fully participatory democracy representing everyone's free will, the hierarchy lying behind daily routine behaviours consciously or unconsciously influence social interaction between each other may potentially promote informal hierarchy. 'More active and ambitious members of democratic committees or other representative bodies may develop quite strong interests, tactics, and routine behaviour, using formal democratic structures and procedures in order to influence and to dominate

consensus-building processes' (Diefenbach, 2013 P115). The high desire to achieve the result of consensus and non-hierarchical forms of community make them contribute to a nonconsensual decision-making process as a short cut of their final goal. It will eventually lead to a small domain of democracy that only achieve equality on paper but not in reality.

Unlike the first and second stages of moral development, these three groups of individuals do not perceive their "interest" as exclusive happiness for themselves alone, but also the happiness of those around them, their communities, and society as a whole. To achieve their desire, they do not seek to create hierarchical relationships that may involve exploitation, but rather contribute to a fair decision-making process and encourage debates among different social groups. However, maintaining a balance between different social groups and ensuring the survival of a non-hierarchical system is challenging. Diefenbach (2013) raises concerns that individuals in stages three, four, and five, while not intentionally seeking hierarchical social relationships, may try to influence others more as they engage in such processes. In the pursuit of the 'good cause', they may use various means, including tactics and manipulation, to make others do things they may not otherwise do. Consequently, an informal hierarchical social relationship may develop. This "softer" form of hierarchy can be seen as the process of legitimizing unequal social relations. As a result, real class inequality is masked by a legislated culture and appears to be a flattened democracy (Adorno, 1993; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972). The problem arises when people willingly accept this 'softer' way of disguising reality, feeling as if they have been forced to do something they do not want to do. There is a strong tendency to believe ideas that fit our expectations (Myers, 2013). Individuals in stages three, four, and five are more likely to believe that they live in a society characterized by interpersonal concordance, respect for social rules, or the consensus of the majority. If society provides signals that reinforce their expectations, the existence of informal hierarchical social relationships and exploitation may be ignored and disguised. According to Weber's argument (1968), despite different explanations for reality provided by individuals from different classes, they share the same goal of legitimizing inequality and making the holders of the culture feel that their situation is better than others'. This phenomenon leads people to happily live within a society that appears non-hierarchical on the surface but is fuelled by authoritarian and hierarchical values underneath. This fact can be evident by continuing weakening of union activities in the western world. The collective voice through union activities can unquestionably be identified as deviant behaviours in hierarchical system (Diefenbach, 2013). Of course, the continuing weakening of trade union is the result from multiple reasons such as the changing demographics of the workforce (Moody, 1997), globalization (Freeman and Ann Elliott, 2003), and economic restructuring (Voss, 1993). I cannot ignore the changing on cultural and ideological norms also the reason causing the weakening of union (Lipset and Marks, 1993). Although the people from west highlight the important of democracy and egalitarian social system, the daily routine behaviours involving hierarchical norms are gradually change people's ethical considerations that tolerate some level of hierarchy for 'good cause'. Therefore, although all three stages reject hierarchy in different level, they cannot eliminate it or even be used by it.

Individuals in the highest stage of moral development, stage six, the universal-ethical-principal orientation, have no connection to any form of hierarchical social order, whether formal or informal (Diefenbach, 2013). Based on Kohlberg's description (1973) for the people in this stage: 'Right is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency. These principles are abstract and ethical (the Golden Rule, the categorical imperative); they are not concrete moral rules like the Ten Commandments. At heart, these are universal principles of justice, of the reciprocity and equality of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons.' As we can see from here, the guidelines of behaviour from this stage people are the pure respect of human being to make their decision based on their own will. This idea corresponds to the Isaiah Berlin's negative freedom (1969) that implies the idea of non-interference – the individual's ability to act without hindrance or coercion unless the behaviours impact other's freedom to action. This principle indicates the respect on other's behaviours and perspectives to the maximum and not believe

someone reasoning is priority to others. Leading by this principle, people in this stage will not obey to any authority that is not democratic and egalitarian (Passini and Morselli, 2010; Rothschild-Witt, 1979). Additionally, individuals in stage six view their own well-being as intertwined with the well-being of others and the greater good (Kohlberg, 1973). They recognize that upholding ethical principles and promoting justice benefits both themselves and society. This perspective can lead to a sense of personal fulfilment that goes beyond narrow self-interest.

Although the moral superiority of these individuals may lead others highly influenced by them to behave obediently, this authority is solely driven by morality, emancipating people from exploitation driven by hierarchical values. However, for an average person, completely view their own well-being as intertwined with the well-being of others is a difficult work. This is why most researchers, including Kohlberg himself, view stage six as a theoretical guideline (Crain, 1985). Nevertheless, numerous great moral leaders, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, and Aung San Suu Kyi, can be classified as stage six individuals, at least based on their public image and appearances. Alternatively, it is also possible that many individuals inadvertently and consistently demonstrate stage six principles through their daily behaviour, without drawing much attention. They may have ordinary jobs and lives, seen by others and even themselves as average. However, from the perspective of moral development, they have already reached the highest level because they possess unique personalities that are not primarily interested in power and social privilege. Consequently, they are more difficult to identify within the public eye. If you encounter someone who is compassionate and easy to get along with, they might be the individuals we are referring to. According to Diefenbach's argument (2013), compared to intellectual or skill-based development, which relies on long-term education, stage six is more dependent on innate skills such as empathy, altruism, or similar philanthropic attitudes. In other words, it represents the "common sense" of people. It is not a stage that requires significant effort, but rather a remembrance and awakening of our natural inclination to be "ordinary," although it is anything but ordinary to some extent.

The theory of moral development stages provides insight into building a non-hierarchical system and offers a potential solution for unions. Many scholars agree with Kohlberg's theory and have developed definitions for individuals in stage six. According to these definitions, individuals in stage six have a strong tendency to abandon the roles of superiors and subordinates and create alternative, egalitarian, and hierarchy-free communities, organizations, and societies (Rothschild and Ollilainen, 1999; Whitley, 1989). "Like the anarchists, their aim is not the transfer of power from one official to another, but the abolition of the pyramid in total: organization without hierarchy" (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979, p. 512). Based on the argument from Nienhaus and Brauksiepe (1997), cultivating stage six values requires promoting altruism, equality, and solidarity. For the study of western style unions (independent and really represent the right of workers) in the Chinese context, the establishment and operation of these kinds of union do not necessary need ethical consideration from stage six. But Kohlberg's theory gives me insight on western ethical norms, which help me to identify some key ethics or values that essential for union based collective voice. There are three ethical considerations that are important for a union:

1. Overcoming the Fear of Authority or Superiors: According to Diefenbach (2013), fear, as a potent emotion guiding individuals' behaviours, is often employed by superiors to maintain dominance in hierarchical systems. It reflects subordinates' self-abasement arising from their powerless social positions. Based on Hofstede's cultural dimension research (1980), Chinese people, in comparison to the Western world, exhibit a higher level of power distance. This suggests that Chinese individuals are more accepting of unequal power distribution in society, which implies the prevalence of fear among subordinates towards superiors. However, this phenomenon may have undergone changes over the past 40 years, especially following the open-door policy initiated in 1978. Connecting with Kohlberg's theory, overcoming fear towards superiors directly corresponds to rejecting stage one. If Chinese workers cannot overcome this fear, any form of resistance activity will likely be unsuccessful.

2. **Abandoning the Self-Service Principle:** Drawing from Kohlberg's theory, this action constitutes a rejection of the entire pre-conventional level, encompassing both stage one and stage two. As discussed earlier, an atomized society is more susceptible to domination, as the feelings of individualism and isolation can facilitate the control exerted by power structures such as governments and corporations (Bauman, 2000). Hierarchical systems heavily rely on an atomized structure. Therefore, forsaking the self-service principle and embracing the conventional level of ethical consideration (stage three and four), which signifies values that reflect a social conscience and concern for the treatment of others, becomes the foundational basis for collective action. In the context of union activities, workers' social solidarity stands as a pivotal element ensuring the unions' strength (Standing, 2011; Sennett, 1998). As argued by Kelly (1998), labour resistance mobilization stems from a perception of unfairness. Fairness, being a fundamental ethical pursuit, has the potential to resonate across society and garner support beyond activity stakeholders. In this regard, individuals harbouring this ethical consideration can potentially unite people throughout society. To foster strong solidarity in the pursuit of resistance activities, the essential trait of workers lies in possessing the conventional level of ethical consideration, broadening their focus beyond themselves to encompass those around them.

3. **Pursuing Equality through Consensus Negotiation:** This action embodies the ethical consideration of the post-conventional level according to Kohlberg's theory, signifying a direct challenge to hierarchical systems. While reaching stage six isn't a necessity for successfully organizing collective union activities, workers who have fulfilled the first two ethical considerations mentioned above have met the prerequisites for preparing union activities against authoritative or superior groups. The ethical consideration at this stage emphasizes the significance of procedural rules in achieving consensus, offering a pragmatic approach to realizing workers' demands through union activities. Therefore, those who reach the third ethical consideration can be seen as potential leaders for such activities. Not all workers participating in union activities need to fulfil all three ethical requisites, but a few leaders possessing these traits will suffice. They can serve as representatives navigating positive outcomes for activities. Guided by their outright rejection of the hierarchical system, their aim isn't limited to temporary successes based on workers' interests; instead, they strive for institutional changes that empower the working class. Their commitment to equality can directly lead to value-oriented contentions highlighted by He and Su (2018), posing a genuine threat to the hierarchical system. Hence, their roles are pivotal in precipitating the true dismantling of hierarchy.

To elucidate the three stages of ethical consideration further, the first consideration signifies the willingness to oppose authority. The second consideration indicates the foundation upon which workers can attain social empowerment. The third consideration offers the methodology for realizing activities and garnering support from the entire society. The first two stages are crucial for all workers participating in collective union activities. Only leaders need to fulfil all three ethical considerations. Nevertheless, the role of a leader is indispensable. Individuals who fulfil the first two ethical considerations cannot organize value-oriented contentions as suggested by He and Su (2018). They don't truly challenge the legitimacy of the hierarchical system but solely question the inequitable treatment within the system, akin to other interest-oriented resistance activities. Their wavering stance on equality and acceptance of hierarchy makes them susceptible to manipulation by authorities. For instance, consider the 2010 Honda strike. Despite the eventual fulfilment of workers' demands and the apparent success in achieving immediate goals, the strike's triumph didn't translate into sustained enhancements in labour conditions at the factory. Workers continued to grapple with issues related to inadequate wages, extended work hours, and insufficient benefits. Additionally, factory management took measures to quell further labour organization and activism. Therefore, for a resistance activity with enduring success, individuals who have fulfilled all three ethical considerations and question the hierarchical system itself are essential.

However, for a leader capable of orchestrating a value-oriented labor resistance activity, it's not only imperative to possess ethical considerations but also necessitates knowledge, skills, and extensive battle experience against authorities, or even an awareness of external political opportunities that

weaken authorities' power. Consequently, in this developed ethical model, the focus lies in determining whether individuals possess the motivation or engagement required for unionized collective expression. Nonetheless, achieving long-term successful resistance activities still requires support from various dimensions.

In the Chinese context, the introduction of the open-up policy and economic reforms after 1978 has gradually transformed employment relationships by institutionalizing new behavioural norms more closely aligned with Western practices. These changes have particularly influenced generations born after the reforms. It can therefore be argued that, under the influence of relatively free-market principles, there has been a growing tendency among these generations—especially those born in the 1980s and later—to exhibit ethical reasoning consistent with Kohlberg's conventional and postconventional levels, which are often associated with egalitarian values in Western contexts. While this argument remains open to further empirical validation, existing research does indicate notable generational differences between the post-1980s cohort and their predecessors. Research by Martinsons and Ma (2009) suggests that important events in Chinese contemporary history, such as the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, the Cultural Revolution in 1966, and the implementation of the One-Child Policy and economic reforms in 1978 and 1979, may have influenced the behaviours, attitudes, values, and beliefs of the Chinese people. These events potentially shape generational differences. As mentioned in the previous chapter, ethic- or value-oriented actions are the key to breaking free from control under a hierarchical system in China. Therefore, shifts in values among China's younger generations may serve as key indicators of the future trajectory of collective voice. Whether these generations demonstrate a stronger orientation toward egalitarianism or remain aligned with authoritarian values will play a crucial role in shaping the potential for collective action and independent representation. Kohlberg's stages of moral development provide a framework to understand western ethics that promote independent union activities. For the Chinese context, the ethical consideration stage that develop from here will help me understand the potential of Chinese union activities through the change in values and its implications for the working class in different generations, influenced by changes in the employment relationship caused by economic reforms. To assess the extent of these changes and their impact, Chinese workers from the new working class will be interviewed. However, before delving into that discussion, a review of studies on potential value and ethic changes lead by social actions in the Chinese context will be necessary.

#### 2.3.10: Section Conclusion

In conclusion of this section, egalitarianism represents the internal force driving collective voice and union development. It signifies the power of decentralization within society. The theory from Diefenbach indicate how hierarchical system has been invented from the interplay between mindset and social actions and how ethic and value play an important role to break the shackles of hierarchy. The question of whether Chinese people accept the ethical consideration from the west that emphasis freedom and equal will indicate the future of collective voice in China. Kohlberg's theory of moral development stages provides a foundation to understand the west ethics that related to collective actions. The theory suggests that individuals in higher moral stages are less accepting of hierarchical social orders and more inclined towards creating non-hierarchical systems. The collective actions representing deviant behaviour to against hierarchical system will also be promoted through ethics development. To develop western style union activities in the Chinese context, the western ethics to collective voice and action will be necessary. When Chinese working class can develop ethical considerations for union activities, it will fulfil the basic to organize collective actions. However, the existing formal and informal hierarchical construct routine behaviour in a society significantly influence people's thinking and acceptance of hierarchy, which barrier the development of collective voice in China. Nonetheless, there are always individuals who resist exploitation and hierarchical values based on their innate humanity. Understanding the potential value change in the Chinese context and the moral stages of the working class is crucial for predicting the future of collective voice and union development.

## Literature Review Section Four: Ethical change through Chinese context and collective voice opportunities

### 2.5 Chapter introduction:

The Cultural Revolution, as the most important historical event in Chinese history, influenced ethics and the cultural context of the decade and must be discussed. Most of the time, the event of the Cultural Revolution is described as ten years of chaos, with Chinese scholars tending to avoid commenting on this event. However, its cultural influence on the people, especially those who were born during these ten years and have not yet retired, was significant. With the generations born after the open-up policy and economic reforms in 1980, they are together creating a unique employment environment and cultural atmosphere in the Chinese workplace. The situation during and after the Cultural Revolution can be regarded as an interesting topic to discuss, which implies the differences between the older generation, who experienced the Cultural Revolution, and the new generation that was born during the market-oriented society. This part of the chapter will discuss the event of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, economic reform, and golden age for working class spontaneous empowerment from the perspectives of ethic and culture and try to understand their influence on the Chinese people. I will examine how the ethic that approved authoritarianism developed and the elements that may challenge it from an ethical perspective. The section will evolve the discussion on the renewal of labour law and the establishment of Labour Non-Government-owe Organization (LNGO), which in some extent play the role of union. The more egalitarian ethics and values leading by the economic reform and working-class efforts threaten the hierarchical legitimacy of Chinese society. It is a reasonable speculation that new generations of working class born after economic reform are holding more anti-hierarchical ethics comparing to the former generations in the Chinese context, which legitimize collective voice and action. From this section, I can answer the question of how the shift in values and ethical considerations from Chinese working class can result in the formation of independent unions, and why the thesis that measures this shift can foresee the future of workers' collective voice in China.

#### 2.5.1: The Event of the Cultural Revolution and Its Impact afterward

From 1966 to 1976, a special period for the Chinese people, known as the Cultural Revolution, took place. This event ended after Mao's death and the arrest of the 'Gang of Four'. Although many years have passed since this event, according to the argument from Lu (2008), the chaos caused by the Cultural Revolution still has a devastating effect on Chinese thought, culture, and communication behaviours. The Cultural Revolution is widely described by the Chinese as 'ten years of chaos'. During this chaos, millions of Chinese were persecuted, and thousands died. As described by Lu (2008), stories of 'children denouncing their parents, students beating their teachers, husbands and wives opposing each other, and workers betraying employers - all in the name of defending Mao's revolutionary cause' were common. This chaos destroyed the traditional culture of China, replacing old artistic expressions with formulaic political jargon and tedious ideological clichés. During those ten years, the oldest and most flourishing civilization in the world transformed into a cultural wasteland (Lu, 2008).

The fundamental idea from Mao and his comrades was based on Marxist-Leninist-Maoist doctrines, which focused on class struggle. The goal of the revolution was to achieve a communist society (Lu, 2008). The concept of class struggle indicated that the proletariat class needed to constantly fight against bourgeois ideas and traditional behaviours to ensure the dictatorship of the proletariat and prevent China from moving toward a capitalist or semi-colonial society. According to Communist propaganda, to achieve this, it was necessary to abolish all classes, parties, and states, granting everyone equal rights and access, ultimately reaching a true communist society (Lu, 2008). There

would be no privileges based on materials or goods, but only on need. This kind of propaganda about the shining version of the future was inculcated everywhere, such as in schools, workplaces, and all kinds of mass media. According to Lu (2008), Communist ideology became the new religion for the Chinese people. Any thoughts, languages, or actions that reflected the Communist view of the world were considered 'right' and 'revolutionary', while all other ideas or opposing views were labeled as 'wrong' and 'counterrevolutionary', leading to serious consequences for those who held them. Mao himself was identified as the 'savior of the people', and his ideas or thoughts became the only correct version for almost everything, with Mao serving as the representative of the truth. As observed by Ahn (1976, P266), 'All policy and processes had to be justified in terms of Mao's thought; Mao's words served as policy statements. At the peak of a campaign, Mao Tse-tung's (Mao Zedong's) Thought thus served not merely as a guide for action but as a source of quasi-religious inspiration'.

Since the 1950s, Communist propaganda had emphasized the conversion of ideology, based on the idea that the correct ideology is the key and basic condition for the moral well-being of individuals. According to Leshan Dong's argument (1999), Chinese Communists believed that good moral well-being was largely determined by a proletarian family background and active participation in all political campaigns. These political campaigns were always identified with loyalty to Mao and the party, confessing one's inner selfish thoughts and motives, and exposing others' 'misleading' behavior or thoughts. To ensure ideological conformity, thought reform became a necessary path, making people repeatedly exposed to the party's propaganda. Other methods, such as confession, self-criticism, and political study sessions, were also used to achieve conformity. In schools, children from an early age were taught that they were the successors of the Communists, and their future mission was to defend this success and continually attack the bourgeois class. Reinforcing the Marxist-Maoist notion became a common goal for all schools and party propaganda sectors to reach ideological conformity. Anyone who did not accept this 'correct thought' would face severe punishment.

#### 2.5.2: The Transition from Confucianism to an Absolute Authoritarian Culture

According to the argument from Wander (1984), a nation's ideology is closely linked to its culture. The concept of ideological conformity and the moral integrity of individuals is not a new concept in Chinese traditional culture, specifically in Confucianism (Chu, 1977; Fairbank, 1976; Pye, 1968). Confucianism advocated for the pursuit of Junzi (Gentleman) as the goal for everyone in society. Chinese Communists also promoted conformity but cultivated people who would only show loyalty to Marxist-Maoist ideology. As Fairbank (1976) indicated, the notions of Marxist-Maoist ideology during the Cultural Revolution had overtones of Confucianism. Although their key principles are different, they share similar characteristics, which explains why Chinese people quickly accepted this new concept. However, this similarity did not help the survival of Chinese traditional culture. The radical change in the political and ideological fields also led to a radical change at the cultural level (Lu, 2008). During the Cultural Revolution period, temples were burned, cultural artifacts were destroyed, classical books were banned, and traditional arts and rituals were eradicated. The most devastating destruction for Chinese traditional culture was the negative influence on Confucian ethics and practices, which require more time to reconstruct (Lu, 2008). Because there are significant differences between Communism and Confucianism, the cultural transformation aimed to completely eradicate all traditional values from China, which had taken over five thousand years to develop. Certain concepts emphasized in Confucianism, such as balance, family unity, respect for authority, loyalty to superiors and friends, saving face, and upholding human dignity, were completely rejected by the new Communist ideology (Lu, 2008). Both in terms of form and content, balance was no longer a concern. All decisions made by the party were radical, unprecedented in Chinese history. During the Cultural Revolution period, family members were encouraged to disown one another if they did not follow Communist principles. All forms of authority and order at home, school, and the workplace could be easily challenged as a new cultural fashion. The only authority to be followed was Mao, and everyone was expected to obey and worship him. The same treatment applied to friends and superiors; if they did not adhere to Maoist ideology, betraying them was considered a 'true revolutionary act'. During this period, humiliation, violence, and torture were not uncommon as

punishments for 'betraying the revolution'. Dignity could be easily stripped away, including the basic right to live.

The intention to destroy all traditional cultural elements can be traced back to an over-interpretation of Marx's theory about culture. According to Marx (1967), the function of culture is to legitimize social inequality. The purpose of the Communist society during the Cultural Revolution was to create a completely equal society with no privileges or exploitation. Therefore, all cultural elements would become useless in the future utopian society. The Chinese people during that period worshipped this idea and strongly believed that eradicating traditional cultural elements was a meaningful step toward a great Communist society. Due to this strong belief and desire for an unrealistic bright future, people followed Mao's lead without question. Anyone who tried to expose the flaws in these ideas would be identified as a 'counterrevolutionary criminal'. Under these circumstances, the Cultural Revolution lasted for ten years, causing a great impact on Chinese people's thoughts and culture, especially for those born during or close to this period. In the next part, I will discuss the profound impact on Chinese people in cultural aspects during and after the Cultural Revolution.

### 2.5.3: The Ethic Influence Caused by the Cultural Revolution

The characteristic of traditional Chinese thinking can be identified as synthesis, holism, and the integration of opposites (Kincaid, 1987; Lin Yu-tang, 1936; Nakamura, 1964). However, after the Cultural Revolution, these traditional thinking models for the Chinese people changed, leading to a more polarized view. The intense influence of slogans, wall posters, revolutionary songs, and operas during the ten years of chaos resulted in polarized thinking among the Chinese (Lu, 2008). This polarized view led people to categorize the world into black versus white and good versus evil. As a result of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese thinking became more dogmatic and radicalized than before. This was engendered by the complete rejection of all thoughts except for Maoist ideology. Mao himself became a living god and saviour of the Chinese people during that time (Leese, 2011). All speeches, songs, and rituals served one purpose: blind faith in Mao's teachings, applied to every aspect of Chinese life. According to Ji Li Jiang's account (1997, P265), 'To us, Chairman Mao was God. He controlled everything we read, everything we heard, and everything we learned in school. We believed everything he said. Naturally, we knew only good things about Chairman Mao and the Cultural Revolution. Anything bad had to be the fault of others. Mao was blameless. Mao's Little Red Book, recording Maoist thoughts, became the bible of the entire nation. During this period, critical thinking became unnecessary. As Lu (2008) argues, people's minds became stifled, mechanical, and confined. It created a climate of thoughtlessness that persisted even after the 2000s, explaining why China still exhibits high power distance even after the economic reforms and open-up policy of the 1980s. An example of this climate can be found in Lu's research (2008), where one interviewee expressed doubt about the government's version of the Chinese-U.S. plane collision, which blamed the U.S. for the accidents. The interviewee's entire family verbally attacked him, considering him a traitor to the nation. The interviewee was surprised and disappointed by their reaction, saying, 'They are all highly educated, but they do not seem to think and question beyond what the government tells them. They refuse to listen to alternative views. Whenever they hear any criticism of China, they get angry and become defensive.' The Cultural Revolution's event diminished Chinese people's ability to engage in critical thinking and made them accustomed to unquestioningly following authority. Even when presented with evidence and logical inferences, it is still challenging for them to engage in arguments as critical independent thinkers (Lu, 2008).

The passion and mythmaking during the Cultural Revolution sacrificed the ability for rational and critical thinking among Chinese people. Under the guise of protecting the interests of the proletarian class, committing crimes against humanity became an acceptable behaviour. According to Arendt (1963), language usage is directly linked to thought. Any restriction on language leads to thought deprivation, which can be identified as evil. A similar situation to that of Adolf Eichmann during his war crimes trial can be observed among Chinese people during the Cultural Revolution. As observed by Arendt (1963), Adolf Eichmann had lost his ability to think beyond the bounds of Nazi rhetoric. The

linguistic rules he followed had convinced him that what he had done was right, without any conscious intent to harm. This example resonates with the situation in China during the Cultural Revolution. As argued by Edelman (1977, P19), 'Banal language evocative of fears, hopes, or personal interests engenders firm, single-minded cognition that changes with altered social situations. That political spectators are rarely in a position to express anything, but a dichotomous choice doubtless encourages this outcome'.

After the Cultural Revolution, the ethics to fit obedience was emphasized. Although there are significant differences between Communism and Confucianism, both ideologies placed importance on the principle of obedience. The only difference lies in identifying the authority to be obeyed. Respect for and obedience to authority are important concepts in Chinese social life, according to Confucian principles (Lu, 2008). While the authority figures may vary, such as teachers, employers, or the government, the value of high-level obedience remained unchanged. Due to the thoughtless climate brought about by the Cultural Revolution, the value of obeying authority without question, which was already present in Confucian principles, became further reinforced instead. This can be observed in family life, the workplace, and the education system in Chinese society. This helps explain why China is identified as a high-power distance society (Hofstede, 1980). The next part will focus on its influence in the workplace, discussing the changes after Chinese economic reform and the open-up policy and why the new generation in China differs from the older generation.

#### 2.5.4: Cultural and Ethical Change after Economic Reform in the Chinese Workplace

In addition to the cultural revolution in the 1960s that caused changes in Chinese cultural elements, the economic reform and open-up policy in the 1980s can be regarded as another crucial event that influenced Chinese culture and values, driven by the demands of a market-oriented economy. I have discussed the changes in cultural wave, which aimed to meet the needs of the new economic environment for relative free competition by emphasizing alternative ideas, creativity, and independent thinking, which opposed the concept of authority obedience rooted in Confucian principles and Communist ideology during the cultural revolution. In the next part, I will discuss the cultural changes in the Chinese workplace after the economic reform. This will include an analysis of labour resistance activities to examine the changes in power distance levels or relevant ethics.

After the anti-Japanese War and subsequent civil war, socialist leaders in China began to emphasize the development of heavy industry (Lin, Cai, and Li, 1996). However, relying solely on a market-oriented economy was unrealistic, as various Chinese industries remained underdeveloped due to the war. A planned economy system was introduced in China, including policies to set prices and allocate products and labour administratively. Since all inputs and outputs were determined by planners, competition between Chinese organizations was non-existent, as they were all state-owned enterprises, and the profitability of state enterprises was guaranteed. During this period, managers had limited autonomy and had no power to make decisions regarding employment and wage compensation (Lin, Cai, and Li, 1996). Labor allocation played a central role in the planned economy. Urban workers were assigned specific jobs and employers by the Bureau of Labor and Personnel, with little opportunity for further mobility. The wage reform in 1956 established a classification system based on occupation, region, industry, ownership (state or collective), administrative level (central or local), and type of workplace (size and technological level) to determine wages or benefits (Bian, 1994; Yueh, 2004). Although wages could vary between individuals under this system, the distribution of wages was compressed, not directly reflecting differences in productivity (Cai, Park, and Zhao, 2008). In this context, the ethics that fit high authority obedience from Confucian principles was well-suited. Without a market-oriented economic environment, alternative ideas or independent thinking skills were not necessary to succeed in market competition or avoid bankruptcy. Simply following the lead of authority was seen as the most efficient way to benefit. A few years later, the cultural revolution began, reinforcing the ethics to high authority obedience and making it one of the most obvious features of Chinese culture. Although the cultural revolution lasted for only ten years, its influence extended far beyond that period. Two reasons can be identified to explain why the public accepted

this situation and ethical codes that undergo. Firstly, it can be traced back to traditional Confucian ethics. Secondly, the institutional environment under the planned economy and fixed wage distribution supported this value, as mentioned earlier.

The economic reform and open-up policy in the late 1970s can be seen as an acceptance of globalization. Globalization involves the expansion of global capitalism and its effects on labour and social services (Chan, Peng, 2011). As Callinicos (2007) argues, globalization is an economic process that increases cross-border integration of production and markets. It represents the freedom of capital to transcend national boundaries (Mehmet, Mende, and Sinding, 1999), achieved through multinational corporations, exploration of new consumer markets, and relocation of factories to reduce production costs for higher profitability. As capital moves across national boundaries, globalization inevitably reduces the power of the nation-state, leaving them with little choice but to make labour and welfare concessions in exchange for investment from multinational companies (Miberg, 2004). This is done by limiting business regulations, taxes, environmental protection, wages, and labour welfare (Mehmet et al., 1999; Braunstein and Epstein, 2004). As Mosley (2007) describes, developing countries, in particular, must compete to survive in the face of globalization, leading to reduced government intervention, lower taxes, and the relaxation of environmental, health and safety, and labor regulations. China, after experiencing the deflation caused by the planned economy and the chaos of the cultural revolution, sought to break its isolation, and embrace globalization as a solution. As a result, China successfully attracted over 380,000 foreign enterprises between 1980 and 2001 (Zhu, 2004), becoming the world's second-largest recipient of foreign direct investment in 2009 (Sung, Lifei, and Yanping, 2011). After years of negotiations, China was accepted as a member of the WTO. On one hand, China became the "world's factory" and achieved significant GDP growth. On the other hand, in order to meet the criteria for WTO membership, the existing social structure faced significant challenges. The bankruptcy of many state-owned enterprises (SOEs) struck the working class first. Approximately 28 million workers lost their jobs from 1998 to 2003 (Information Office of the State Council, 2004). Many internal migrant workers left their rural homes and flocked to the cities as cheap labour to meet the demands of low-cost strategies employed by private-owned organizations. This created a new working class with low pay and insecure working conditions. However, it was not all bad news. After China's WTO membership, the absolute power of Chinese political authorities was shaken by globalization, as they had to consider and guarantee the interests of shareholders—the foreign investors. This created a relatively more favourable environment for grassroots activities such as worker resistance and protests. It was a disaster for the working class, as they lost their political advantage compared to the Mao era, but also an opportunity for empowerment and the realization that they needed to fight for their rights rather than rely solely on authority.

#### 2.5.5: The Change of the Chinese employment relationship from a legislative perspective

After the economic reform and open-up policy in the 1980s, the ethic to fit high authority obedience among the Chinese public began to change, driven by the market-oriented economy. As the power of entrepreneurs increased, the power of the working class decreased on the surface but increased in essence as labour resistance activities started to play an important role in the employment relationship. Although workers were considered a privileged group in the Mao era, they lacked real power both in the workplace and at the national level. According to Au and Bai (2010), workers before the economic reform in China could be seen as a privileged group in political movements like the cultural revolution, where they were the least vulnerable to repression. However, they lacked the power to voice their concerns or make decisions themselves. Their power came from the authority, rather than from their own empowerment and grassroots efforts. They were accustomed to following the lead of the upper class without question (Au and Bai, 2010). With the economic reform and open-up policy, as entrepreneurs gained power from the government, the voice of the working class began to be heard for the first time since 1949. As the working class started losing the special protections provided by the Chinese government, workers felt betrayed (Au and Bai, 2010) and showed great support for the student resistance activities in 1989 at Tiananmen Square. This event signalled the

workers' inclination to challenge the authority they had unquestioningly followed for a decade. It also indicated a questioning of the ethical acceptance of high-level authority obedience that originated from the cultural revolution. Simultaneously, as many SOEs deliberately ran their businesses poorly to bankrupt them and strip workers of their rights while allowing management to profit, workers began to realize that blind obedience could ultimately ruin their lives and lead to more significant problems. The working class started thinking for themselves and began to assert their power and voice in Chinese society. Concurrently, the conflict between capital and labour intensified as both the entrepreneur class and the working class gained more power. Official statistics indicate an increase in labour dispute cases from 1994 to 2003, with the number of cases rising from 19,098 to 226,000, and the number of workers involved increasing from 77,794 to 800,000 (Qiao and Jiang, 2005). In 2005 alone, labour dispute cases accepted and heard by labour dispute arbitration committees at all levels of government reached 314,000, involving 744,000 workers (Qiao and Jiang, 2005). These statistics suggest a gradual decrease in power distance for Chinese labour. Two opportunities for the working class during the Hu-Wen administration from 2002 to 2012 contributed to this change. Firstly, the significant development of labour law potentially empowered workers in their employment relationships in China. Secondly, the relatively freer environment encouraged the development of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that could potentially replace the functions of the ACFTU. Although the new labour law did not solve all of the workers' problems and instead aimed to empower them while preserving the interests of the dominant group, it still influenced the ethics held by Chinese workers, particularly the new generation, who have already shown different values and work performance compared to previous generations, such as a greater willingness to express individual voices (Wang and Wang, 2017). The development of grassroots power through NGOs has not been smooth, especially under the Xi administration, which neutralized a large number of them. However, as seen in the Honda strike of 2010, workers sought to democratically elect union leaders, focusing on issues of democracy rather than payment and mistreatment, as seen in previous strikes in China (Barboza, 2010). These phenomena indicate a change in ethics among the Chinese new generation, as they seek to empower themselves purposefully to defend their rights, not only in the present but also for the future. It also reflects their distrust of authorities, including employers and the government, and their strong desire for an independent voice with lower power distance compared to previous generations.

After the economic reform from a planned economy to a market-oriented economy, tens of millions of workers gradually moved from rural areas to the cities, transitioning from an informal role to formal urban citizens as the new working class. Due to the low cost of these laborers, it facilitated productivity gains and economic growth for Chinese society without wage inflation (Garnaut, Cai, and Song, 2014). It also helped China achieve high levels of foreign exchange by exporting cheap products and gaining access to foreign technology. Zhang's research (2016) supports the notion that an export-driven economy has been the main growth strategy in China in recent years. This approach has led to a significant external imbalance, where China sells a large number of inexpensive products in exchange for high-tech elements for domestic development. To sustain this development strategy, Chinese workers have had to work diligently with limited rest time to facilitate the high-tech exchange with the Western world. In light of this perspective, the Chinese government's approach to labor resistance activities becomes more understandable. In order to maintain the high-tech exchange, the government must support the position of employers. However, this strategy has faced challenges in recent years, not only due to the increasing number of labor resistance activities but also due to the nature of a market-oriented economy.

For the development of a market-oriented economy, it becomes necessary to shift power from political authorities to the emerging entrepreneurial class. Although, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the entrepreneurial class is still under the control of political authorities, they have been granted a certain level of autonomy to participate in market competition and pursue their interests, albeit within the confines of authority control. Winning advantages in the market is the essential goal for the entrepreneurial class. As the working class has lost the additional power provided by the authority, they have become the targets of cost-cutting strategies employed by the entrepreneurial

class, resulting in an increasing number of working-class protests. However, this is not entirely bad news for the authorities, as the main social conflict has shifted from the regime versus the public to the entrepreneurial class versus the working class. As described by Au and Ba (2010), particularly after the events of 1989, most protests target the entrepreneurial class rather than the political authorities. Therefore, for the stability of the regime, working-class protests not only weaken the social credibility of the entrepreneurial class but also divert attention from the conflict and provide an opportunity for the authorities to act as a "good coordinator" to regain lost social credibility.

For the Chinese authorities, sharing some power with the working class to suppress the potentially overpowerful entrepreneurial class is a good strategy to maintain their political position. However, this is not an easy task, as it requires not only empowering the working class to some extent to contend with the entrepreneurial class but also ensuring that the working class does not become powerful enough to jeopardize the entire economic system, which would ultimately harm the authorities' interests. On one hand, the establishment of independent trade unions is prohibited, while on the other hand, legal support is provided to the working class. Kelly's argument (1998) suggests that labor resistance activities stem not only from financial issues but also from a sense of injustice among subordinate groups. Following this strategy, labor law has gradually developed in China since the economic reform to provide a sense of justice to the working class. Although the Chinese authorities have never considered sharing real power with the working class, the development of labor contract law has gradually transformed the employment relationship from a lord and subordinate dynamic within a work unit to an employer and worker relationship governed by a specific contract. This reflects egalitarian values beyond the authorities' expectations and may be one of the reasons for generational differences, with the younger generations born after the economic reform in 1980 placing more emphasis on their voices and the protection of their rights (Martinsons and Ma, 2009).

#### 2.5.5.1: The First Legislation Attempt after Economic Reform

On the surface, some positive developments can be observed in the legislation field. A new law for labour relationships has been introduced, and new terms such as labour contracts and collective negotiation have been established after the economic reform. This phenomenon can be seen as a significant advancement for the market-based economy. However, the limited focus on equality can also be considered one of the main reasons for labour resistance activities during this period. According to Ngok's research (2008), labour laws require workers to sign written individual labour contracts with their employers. The contract should include details such as contract duration, job description, work location, salary, working conditions, labour protections, and legal liabilities for violating the contract. It is expected that both the employer and the worker are bound by the terms of the contract. Additionally, collective agreements through negotiations between workers (represented by trade unions) and employers are permitted under labour laws. Matters such as remuneration, working hours, rest periods, holidays, occupational safety and hygiene, and insurance and welfare can be discussed through collective negotiation. Moreover, labour dispute mediation committees and arbitration committees should be established at both the organizational and local labour administrative levels to handle disputes. If arbitration fails, the case can be brought before the local people's court. Ngok's research (2008) suggests that labour policymakers aim to establish an institutional framework for labour and capital to interact within the context of contracts and labour laws.

However, the reality was quite different from policymakers' expectations, or perhaps these realities were part of their expectations. Since the implementation of the new labour law, the situation for workers did not improve significantly. Many employers disregarded the provisions of labour contracts. One reason for this may be the lack of understanding among workers themselves. At the beginning of the 21st century, the concept of labour contracts was still new to many workers, and they did not fully grasp its significance. On the other hand, the central government prioritized profitability and investment returns, leading them to focus more on employers' perspectives than on workers. According to Ngok's research (2008), only one percent of private organizations entered labour

contracts with their workers. Most organizations that paid attention to labour contracts were state-owned, collective, or foreign-funded firms. Most workers in the private sector, especially internal migrant workers, experienced low incomes and poor working conditions. Even in organizations where labour contracts were signed, approximately 60 percent of the contracts had durations of less than three years, while only twenty percent were non-fixed term contracts. Some organizations even forced workers to sign "life and death contracts," which exempted employers from any liability for industrial accidents resulting in injury or death (Ngok, 2008).

Ngok's research (2008) identifies four reasons that contributed to these circumstances. First, workers were at a disadvantage compared to capital. If a worker requested a written labour contract, there was a high possibility of losing their job. Cheap and readily available internal migrant workers were abundant during this period, and most workers were hired based on oral agreements that were not protected by the new labour law. Second, the contents of the labour law were vague and lenient, allowing employers to exploit its limitations. For instance, the labour law did not specify a time limit for employers to sign labour contracts with their workers, nor did employers need to provide any compensation for workers dismissed before their labour contracts expired. These circumstances encouraged employers to sign short-term fixed labour contracts, often for one year or even three months. The purpose of this practice was to ensure that workers were always in their prime and easier to dismiss when they grew old or fell ill, which led to poor job security. Since there was no compensation for workers, employers had more power to dismiss anyone they deemed unsuitable for the job. As a result, many workers were dismissed immediately after their probation period, and employers did not need to pay any additional compensation when they became regular workers. For many workers, the end of the probation period meant the end of their jobs. Third, government inspections existed only in name. According to official statistics from 2001, there were 40,000 people responsible for labour issue inspections in all of China. However, there were approximately 239 million workers (The Information Office of the State Council, 2002). In the city of Shenzhen, one of China's largest cities, there were only 200 labour inspectors in 2001 (Nanfang Zhoumo, 2002). As mentioned earlier, economic growth was the government's priority, and employers' perspectives were given more importance than workers'. This situation allowed employers to openly prioritize capital over labour. According to Lambert and Chan's argument (1999), workers had no room to negotiate their wages and working conditions under despotic capital, whether foreign, domestic, or local, during this period. Fourth, the punishments for labour contract violations were not stringent enough. According to Article 98 of the Labor Law, "employers who revoke labour contracts or intentionally delay the conclusion of labour contracts should be ordered by labour administrative departments to rectify the situation and compensate workers for any losses they may have suffered." The only possibility for holding employers criminally responsible was if they forced workers against regulations and caused major injuries or deaths. These circumstances allowed employers to disregard the labour law. Moreover, due to the weakness of workers' organizations, the idea of collective agreements was essentially "hollow." In the Chinese context, functional trade unions were lacking, and the official union could not effectively represent workers' rights. Although the new labour law provided some inspiration for possibilities, it was still too premature for the current Chinese labour market. It offered limited assistance to current workers.

The mismatch between policymakers' expectations for the new labour law and the reality led to serious consequences. The conflict between capital and labour escalated. According to official statistics, the number of labour dispute cases increased from 19,098 in 1994 to 226,000 in 2003. Similarly, the number of workers involved in such activities rose from 77,794 to 800,000 during the same period (Qiao and Jiang, 2005). In 2005 alone, the number of labour dispute cases accepted and heard by labour dispute arbitration committees at all levels of government reached 314,000, involving 744,000 workers (Qiao and Jiang, 2005). Most of these disputes revolved around labour remuneration, economic compensation, and insurance and benefits (MLSS, 2006). Although specific figures on spontaneous worker strikes during this period are unavailable, according to Ngok's argument (2008), such resistance activities were not uncommon, particularly among millions of internal migrant workers in major cities, who can be described as the new working class. Examples include labour

resistance activities in the cities of Daqing and Liaoyang from March to May 2002. The social movement for labour rights quickly spread to several cities during this period. Ngok (2008) suggests that it could be considered the largest social protest movement since the democracy movement in 1989.

#### 2.5.5.2: Labor Law Development since 2003

After numerous resistance activities, officials began searching for ways to rectify the dominant position of the entrepreneur class on the battlefield. Some officials recognized the failure of the existing labour regime to provide effective protection for workers, particularly the new working class, often identified as internal migrant workers. Media reports during this time highlighted the experiences of many workers, including long working hours, physical punishment, insults, occupational injuries, fires, and other fatal accidents, unacceptable working conditions, ineffective grassroots trade unions, and local governments prioritizing capital over workers' basic rights (Ngok, 2008). According to data from the State Council, the monthly wages of migrant workers (people who migrated from small rural areas to find employment in large cities) ranged between 500 to 800 yuan (approximately 50 to 80 pounds per month). A small percentage of workers (approximately 4 percent) earned less than 300 yuan per month. Only 27 percent of migrant workers earned more than 800 yuan (Renmin Ribao, 2006). Comparing this to local workers (the old working class), based on figures from the Ministry of Labor and Social Security (MLSS) and the State Bureau of Statistics, the average monthly wages were 1,750 yuan for workers in private organizations and 1,842 yuan for workers in state-owned organizations (MLSS and the State Bureau of Statistics, 2007). This situation helps explain the layoffs that occurred in state-owned organizations during this period. Additional data on these migrant workers' conditions revealed that only 53.7 percent of them had signed labour contracts with their employers, regardless of whether those contracts provided fair treatment for migrant workers (Renmin Ribao, 2006). The consequence of these circumstances was that many migrant workers, unable to improve their working and living conditions, decided to return to their hometowns in search of employment. Finally, the government and employers realized the importance of ensuring fair treatment for workers when labour shortages arose in the Pearl River Delta and other coastal regions since 2003 (MLSS, 2004).

Since 2003, in an effort to stabilize labour relations and improve the living and working conditions of migrant workers, the government, under the new leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, who assumed their positions in 2002 and 2003 respectively, implemented various measures. Social justice and environmental protection were emphasized for the first time in official documents. While economic growth remained a crucial objective, maintaining a balance between economic growth and social justice became a priority for local governments. To address the labour shortage problem in large cities, labour policy and legislation were utilized, focusing on the principles of 'putting people first' and 'building a harmonious society.' Balancing GDP growth with social justice became the main question that needed answering during this time.

Reforming the labour policy regime was often the first step taken by the Chinese government to improve the working and living conditions of migrant workers. The State Council issued the 'Notice on Doing a Better Job Concerning the Employment Management of and Services for Migrant Workers.' This statement emphasized the principles of fair treatment, rational guidance, satisfactory management, and improved services. The statement also outlined six provisions, including the abolition of discriminatory policies and irrational fees against internal migrant workers, elimination of wage deductions and delays in payment, resolution of problems related to free education for their children, provision of vocational training, improvement of living conditions and working environments in urban areas, and strengthening of administrative controls on migrant workers (The State Council, 2003). Another important policy document regarding migrant workers was issued in 2006, which underscored the crucial role of the new working class in Chinese society. It included additional policies to support and expand upon the 2003 policy statement. The document introduced seven guidelines to support the new working class, such as establishing a unified labour market for urban

and rural sectors, promoting policies to protect the legitimate rights of migrant workers, and creating public service systems for migrant workers in both urban and rural areas. The document also outlined concrete policies, including strict regulations on wage payment by employers, the implementation of labour contract systems to protect workers' occupational safety and public health rights, the abolition of discriminatory regulations against migrant workers, inclusion of migrant workers in occupational injury insurance systems, provision of medical insurance for chronic illnesses, broadening the coverage of urban public services for migrant workers, protecting their democratic political rights and land rights, and developing township/town enterprises and rural economies to absorb the local population (Renmin Ribao, 2006).

In terms of legislation, a new labour law was enacted to address complaints regarding employers mistreating workers, which had tipped the balance too much in favour of the entrepreneur class. According to Ngok's commentary (2008), the new labour law aimed to compromise between the interests of workers and employers. It took effect on January 1, 2008, with the hope of addressing the limitations of the old labour law. The new law focused on specific areas to target the weaknesses of the previous legislation. Written contracts became mandatory for all recruitment processes, and verbal contracts were prohibited. Short fixed-term contracts were strongly discouraged, and employers were encouraged to provide non-fixed contracts to workers after they had completed two fixed-term contracts with the same employer. If a fixed-term contract expired, severance payment was required to be given to the worker when they chose to renew the contract. The new labour law emphasized the role of trade unions or workers' congresses, stating that employers must submit proposals about workplace rules or changes to the workers' congress for discussion. These proposals would cover matters such as salary, work allocation, hours, insurance, safety, and holidays. Failure by employers or government officials to comply with the procedures outlined in the law could result in administrative penalties or criminal prosecution.

Compared to the old labour law, the new law was more specific and operationally oriented to protect the interests of laborers. It addressed specific issues with the old law, such as the lack of punishment for contract violations and the absence of specific stipulations regarding labour contracts. Most importantly, it identified the specific role of trade unions in balancing the power between workers and employers. While there were still challenges in its implementation, it cannot be denied that the new labour law made progress in social development and aligned with the principles of 'building a harmonious society' and 'putting people first.' Importantly, workers became more educated and knowledgeable about labour contracts, learning how to protect their interests through labour law (Ngok, 2008). In these circumstances, the new labour law proved more effective than its predecessor.

As mentioned earlier, barriers always arise when laws are put into practice, particularly since the authorities never intended to share real power with the working class. One problem was that the new labour law still did not successfully define who could be regarded as 'labour,' leading to subsequent issues. Internal migrant workers, in particular, were excluded as 'labour' since Chinese law required them to have a census register in the city where they worked. Since they did not officially belong to the city, they were left powerless even with the protection of labour laws. According to Ngok's argument (2008), this ambiguity was a strategic move in Chinese labour legislation and policy to differentiate rural and urban workers. While this ambiguity prevents labour law from protecting all workers equally, it has garnered support from employers and local governments. This ambiguity allows internal migrant workers to be treated differently from urban workers, resulting in lower wages, reduced social security, and fewer employment-based benefits. This aligns with the desires of both employers and local governments to lower labour costs for higher profits. With their support, this strategic ambiguity continues to exist today. However, the problems have not been fully resolved, and employers are still unwilling to take legal risks. According to Ngok's argument (2008), although the development of labour law has provided some balance between labour protection and economic growth, the government's primary focus remains high GDP growth at a low labour cost. While their efforts in legislation and policy have made some difference in the labour market, they have not yet truly addressed the challenges faced by the new working class.

Just a few years after the implementation of the new labour law in 2008, a two-week strike erupted in the world's largest footwear factory in Dongguan city, involving over 30,000 workers in early 2014. According to Chin and Liu (2014), this event can be considered the largest labour strike in recent history. The strike was prompted by low pay and the lack of social insurance for migrant workers in Chinese manufacturing. Looking at the bigger picture, this high-profile labour strike was not an isolated incident since 2008. A series of labour strikes occurred following the 2008 financial crisis (Chan, 2012). It also indicates the failure of the new labour law in 2008. These phenomena have signalled to the government that the old development strategy, which focused on short-term GDP growth and low labour costs, is now being challenged. There is an urgent need for a new strategy that genuinely prioritizes human well-being, and if these problems persist, they may eventually pose a real threat to the regime.

### 2.5.5.3: Summary of Labor Law Development after Economic Reform

As mentioned earlier in this section, the CCP and the government play a crucial role in the development of effective trade unions and the protection of workers' rights. The perspective of the CCP will largely determine the future of labour collective voice development. Despite decades of efforts to empower the working class, the hierarchical system has remained unchanged. The government's unilateral focus on high-speed GDP growth has shifted towards a multilateral development strategy that prioritizes environmental protection and humanism, as mentioned earlier. However, despite the continued development of labour contract laws that emphasize humanism, the employment relationship between employers and workers has not changed significantly, with exploitation still present in a more concealed manner. It is evident that guaranteeing economic development and regime stability are the priorities that the CCP is more concerned about. However, with the support of a new strategy, they are attempting to strike a balance between workers' dissatisfaction and profitability. They aim to give people certain power to ensure their satisfaction and guarantee the profitability of society. This situation shares similarities with the context of a capitalist society, where exploitative realities are legislatively justified, as Weber (1968) mentioned. From the perspective of the Chinese authorities, the preferred choice is not to share real power with the public but to hold power to maintain their dominant position. Through continued GDP growth and limited power sharing, they have successfully legislated the regime. Achieving a balance between workers' satisfaction and profit to ensure the long-term profitability and existence of the regime is the art of their leadership.

If I question whether the growing emphasis on protecting workers' rights from the Chinese authorities indicates a bright future for collective voice with political-level support, I must also consider whether, in an authoritarian society, the privileged group will relinquish power that guarantees their interests for the greater good. We must acknowledge that the Chinese authorities have made considerable efforts to protect workers under the imbalanced employment relationship. However, they intentionally ignore measures that could truly empower the working class, such as allowing the formation of independent trade unions. As seen in the previous chapter, even in contexts like Britain where independent trade unions are permitted, unions still face numerous challenges from capital that hinder their empowerment. However, the Chinese authorities completely prevent any possibility that could lead to an independent union. Compared to British capital, the Chinese authorities have a stronger desire for power control. It is unrealistic to believe that the Chinese authorities will willingly share their power with the working class without a motive to promote their authoritarian interests. As demonstrated by the history of labour law development in the Chinese context mentioned earlier in this section, I can only see intricately woven legislative measures to conceal exploitation. However, does the legislative efforts in labour law mean nothing for the expansion of egalitarian values? The real power of the grassroots working class tells a different story.

### 2.5.6: The Appearance and Development of LNGOs

Just after China officially achieved membership in the WTO, a ten-year period of domestic openness in social space began during the Hu-Wen administration from 2002 to 2012. As discussed earlier, the exploitation of internal migrant workers intensified (Lee, 2007) due to the open-up policy and economic reforms initiated in the 1980s to develop a market-oriented economy under the supervision of the political authority. During this time, labour laws were also developed to find a balance between deteriorating social inequality and the legitimacy of the authority's position. However, compared to previous periods under Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin administrations, which focused on industrialization and urbanization, the suppression of civil society has significantly decreased, providing a better political environment for social organizations during the "prime period of civil society expansion" (Howell and Pringle, 2019: 234). For example, the difficulties in registering certain types of civil organizations have decreased in open-minded regions such as Beijing, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou, subsequently influencing other parts of the country (Howell, 2015). The Ministry of Civil Affairs has also begun releasing some welfare services to NGOs focusing on labour issues (Howell, 2015). The government-initiated Federation of Social Service Organizations was established to provide incubation services to social organizations for Guangdong workers (Hui, 2020). Although, as discussed in the previous section, the Chinese authorities, even under the Hu-Wen administration, are still not entirely friendly to labour organizations, and independent trade unions remain forbidden. However, the power released by the authorities has created "new edges and spaces where gains for workers and activists could be made" (Howell and Pringle, 2019: 232). As mentioned in Hui's research interview (2020), 'in many LNGO-intervened collective disputes, the government could have made workers and LNGOs bear the legal responsibilities, but they did not do that. The government did not pressure me not to engage in workers' strikes. They talked to me asking me to cooperate, but they were not forceful.' Within this atmosphere, an increasing number of labour non-governmental organizations (LNGOs) focusing on the labour movement have been established by the working class themselves as grassroots power to protect workers' rights. Unlike official trade unions in China, LNGOs operate autonomously from employers and are detached from the state power structure. Although their capacity is strictly limited by the legal system, they advocate for labour and truly serve the needs of the working class (Hui, 2020). LNGOs provide various services, including legal aid, assistance in recovering wage arrears, and protection of workers' rights in cases of industrial injuries or occupational diseases (Chen and Yang, 2017). They also create cultural influence through music, drama, and poetry to spread their values and concepts and attract workers to join their fight (Xu, 2013). Some LNGOs engage in corporate social responsibility activities to influence workplace arrangements (Chan, 2013), while others focus on training for individuals or workers' groups to engage in direct resistance activities (Fu, 2017a). In 2010, LNGOs in China experienced an upgrade, led by the Honda protest discussed in the previous section. Many LNGOs transformed into Movement Labor Non-Government-Owned Organizations (MLNGOs), focusing on supporting workers' collective action by establishing common purposes and solidarities among them. The government's tolerance of the 2010 Honda workers' strike led social activists to shift their efforts from protecting individual rights to collective bargaining.

For LNGOs, most of the founders are former workers who have a strong tendency and awareness to fight for workers' rights, representing the power of grassroots anti-authoritarianism with egalitarian values. Because of this, some scholars have a positive view of their efforts, as they protect labour rights and provide assistance to workers in defending their rights (Chan, 2013; Chan and Hui, 2012; Xu, 2013). On the one hand, they act as supervisors to ensure factories comply with labour laws (Chung, 2015). On the other hand, their training of workers promotes their skills in "individualized forms of contentious action" (Fu, 2017b: 454), potentially aiding collective action (Fu, 2017a). Their role is gradually becoming that of agents of social change (Gransow and Zhu, 2016). However, LNGOs in China still have their limitations. Some scholars criticize their focus on individualized forms of assistance that push workers into legally sanctioned procedures (Chan and Siu, 2012; Friedman and Lee, 2010). This approach does not promote workers' solidarity but isolates individuals and limits the potential for further collective action (Lee and Shen, 2011). It also strengthens the power of the party that legislates their projects (Friedman and Lee, 2010). Lee and Shen (2011: 173) describe LNGOs as "anti-solidarity machines" that do not provide any help for building collective, independent labor

movements (Franceschini, 2014). The efforts of LNGOs make them more like moderators than workers' representatives, which some scholars see as a possibility of "welfarist incorporation" by the state (Howell, 2015).

However, as more and more LNGOs transitioned into MLNGOs, encouraged by the success of the 2010 Honda protest, their roles began to change, and they started intervening in collective labor actions, including strikes and collective bargaining (Hui, 2020). This transition led many scholars to reevaluate the position of LNGOs (Franceschini, 2016). Research focusing on the relationship between workers and MLNGOs concluded that workers generate real social power through their trust in MLNGOs and student activists (Xu and Schmalz, 2017). Other scholars, such as Li and Liu (2018), indicate that MLNGOs can help resolve problems faced by workers in collective action. According to Hui's research (2020), MLNGOs employ three tactics.

The first tactic is the election of worker representatives. This tactic is crucial for establishing leadership, mobilizing networks, and building contact structures among workers. When workers encounter workplace issues and are already within the contact network of an MLNGO, they can directly seek help from them. If they are outside the network and want to address their problems, it may be more complex. However, with referrals from friends or information online and in print publications, reaching out to an MLNGO is not very difficult. Sometimes MLNGOs may proactively contact workers during a strike or learn about their struggles through social media. MLNGO staff might travel to the protest site to talk to workers face to face or contact them through social media. Once the staff gains access to the workers, they will organize small meetings with motivated and outraged workers. During these meetings, workers are encouraged to discuss the issues with other workers who may potentially join the protest and bring them to the next meeting. As more and more workers participate in the activities, MLNGOs will encourage them to map out the departments, divisions, and assembly lines in factories to establish communication channels with core workers in each department. Using the snowball strategy, the second layer of workers will be responsible for contacting the third layer of workers, thus building a network of communication. When enough workers have committed themselves to the campaign, MLNGOs will guide them to elect representatives as leaders of the activities. This kind of election represents a culture of democracy and self-autonomy among workers that directly opposes the hierarchical ethics of authoritarian principles (Friedman, 2014).

The second tactic for MLNGOs is promoting collective negotiation. As seen in the 2010 Honda protest, negotiation should be the primary consideration for unions. It signifies the idea of shared responsibility among workers in addressing workplace issues and finding solutions. Initially, workers should believe that their employers are the main cause of their plight, and collective power is the essential solution to end the dispute (Hui, 2010). To achieve this, MLNGOs will try to identify mistakes made by factories or government officials in the improper implementation of the law (Hui, 2020). In other words, they help workers recognize the factory or government as "injustice frames" (Gamson et al., 1982) to frame their protest as a just behavior. Once the workers' resistance activity gains a rationale for engaging in collective action, MLNGOs will discuss with workers to identify optimal solutions to the problem and advocate for collective bargaining between workers' representatives and management by providing a petition to employers for negotiation arrangements (Hui, 2020). If employers accept the petition, and the negotiation goes well, MLNGOs have no further role. However, if employers reject the negotiation, protests become the final solution, and most workers' resistance activities end there (Hui, 2020). As discussed in the theory of Kohlberg's moral stages, the idea of negotiation represents the social-contract orientation in ethical stage 5, indicating that MLNGO staff share egalitarian values. Although workers still rely on them for support, there is a certain level of agreement on these ethics.

After unsuccessful negotiations, protests become the only way forward. MLNGOs can provide certain support to workers during this stage. According to Hui's description (2020), MLNGOs can offer three types of assistance to support protests. At the beginning of this stage, they can provide material

resources such as meeting spaces and solidarity funds for the activities. Unlike unions in the West, although most MLNGOs are run by former workers, they often receive financial support from overseas. On the one hand, this makes them an easy target for Chinese authorities, who define them as betrayers of the nation. On the other hand, they are less likely to experience financial shortages, which is crucial for organizing protests. Secondly, MLNGOs can handle the human resources behind the protests by recruiting the right staff and finding critical personnel to build networks. With the help of professionals, resistance activities can be organized more efficiently, with fewer mistakes. Most importantly, MLNGOs can provide useful advice on representative elections and help workers develop leadership skills themselves. Thirdly, similar to their previous LNGO version, MLNGOs also provide training and teach specific knowledge on law and negotiation. They can offer information and technical support when workers need them. With this help, workers' organizing and mobilizing skills can significantly improve, increasing the success rate of collective bargaining. However, even though MLNGOs can provide significant assistance to workers, most labor resistance activities cannot be described as completely successful. Most agreements reached through negotiation between workers and managers cannot be fully implemented due to the significant power gap between the two parties. The existence of MLNGOs protects certain levels of workers' interests, but they still have significant limitations.

The first and most crucial limitation of MLNGOs is their lack of social and political legitimacy (Hui, 2020). As discussed earlier, although the authority has provided some legal support for the working class, the establishment of independent unions is still not allowed. Due to media control and political suppression by the authorities, most people are unaware of the existence of MLNGOs, making it difficult for them to gain the trust of workers (Franceschini, 2014). Even if they do gain workers' trust, they cannot directly participate in negotiations as they do not officially belong to any company. The law does not grant them a legal position to assist workers. Their involvement has to remain behind the scenes, and even if workers request their participation, they are still not allowed to join (Hui, 2020). Building federations or alliances among MLNGOs is also not tolerated by the Chinese authorities, as it may lead to greater regime instability (Hui, 2020).

Secondly, there is no official support for MLNGOs. As discussed before, the Chinese authorities will never truly support the working class unless it is necessary for the regime's stability. According to social movement literature, turning authorities into sympathizers can be a key method to advance social movements (Lipsky, 1968; Tilly, 1978). However, there is no sign of sympathy from the Chinese authorities. With a strong atmosphere of suppression, MLNGOs have no possibility of influencing the political party or social elites. Additionally, according to Kohlberg's moral stage theory (1973), sympathizers should break free from the control of self-interest and move towards a higher moral stage. In a hierarchical society like China, there is little chance of having these types of sympathizers.

Thirdly, MLNGOs cannot provide long-term support for workers' social movements as they lack a membership system or a loose volunteer system. It is evident that membership and volunteer systems are important for any kind of connective structures (McCarthy and Wolfson, 1996). However, in the context of China, it is necessary to consider avoiding political repercussions (Hui, 2020). As MLNGOs do not have the necessary maintenance systems, they remain external to workers without self-governing and decision-making power within the organizations. Many workers may disengage when the fight lasts for a long time. Finally, MLNGOs do not have the capacity to further assist workers after the strike or critical negotiations. According to Hui's interview (2020), workers lose the momentum to continue fighting for workplace relationships. The leaders of resistance activities might face retribution, and MLNGOs have little power to provide support in such cases and further strengthen workers' power in their workplaces. Moreover, both employers and local governments view them as troublemakers.

MLNGOs faced a significant blow when Xi Jinping assumed the presidency in 2013 and gained power within the CCP. The suppression of MLNGOs began, resulting in a large number of MLNGOs being deemed illegal, and many activists and lawyers were arrested and sentenced. Overseas funding was

also prohibited. The pressure on MLNGOs started in 2013 and peaked in 2019. Nowadays, it is difficult to find any trace of MLNGOs. They emerged in 2010 and faced a decline since 2013. They did not have enough time to fully develop. However, their efforts represent the power of grassroots movements and the ethical shift from authoritarianism to egalitarianism. This makes generational research significant, as it allows me to observe the ethic change through generational waves.

#### 2.5.7: Research on Chinese generational differences

Generational research since the economic reform provides a clue to understanding this wave. Although multiple factors may contribute to generational differences, the development of labour law prompted by the open-up policy, which promoted social movements among the working class, must be an important trigger for these differences. The new generations born after 1980, working in a new market-oriented environment compared to the past, with a gradually stronger concept of egalitarianism, will help me anticipate the future possibilities of collective voice and union activities. Although the hierarchical system is still firmly controlled by the authorities, the meaning and justification for equal power relationships have been gradually redefined by the new generations, posing a real challenge to authoritarian values.

Nowadays, people born in the 1980s are gradually reaching 40 years old, and many of them have already become managers in Chinese organizations. This situation has led to increasing research interest in the generational differences in values, preferences, and attitudes in China. According to Mannheim (1970), generational differences are caused by historical events, with each generation experiencing different events such as war, revolution, famine, and economic development, leading to discrepancies between generations. However, not only people born after the 1980s have experienced economic reform and the open-up policy, but other generations, such as those born in the 1960s and 1970s, have also experienced these historical events. So, what makes the new generation special?

According to Martinsons and Ma (2009), "generation" is a type of national subculture that responds to historical development. Kopperschmidt (2000, P66) defines a generation as "an identifiable group of people who share birth years and experiences as they move through time together." The main theory used by sociologists to explain generational differences is generational subculture theory. This theory, like Mannheim's argument (1970), suggests that each generation is shaped by the events they experienced. However, the subculture theory provides a better explanation for the question raised in the previous chapter. The events experienced during one's impressionable years, such as childhood and adolescence, have a greater influence on their values and ethics compared to other periods of life (Inglehart, 1997). The new generation in China experienced economic reform and the open-up policy during their early years, which had a deeper influence on Western concepts compared to other generations. Those born after the 1980s experienced Chinese economic reform and WTO joining during their childhood and adolescence. They grew up in an environment of economic growth and significant Western cultural influence, which shaped their ethics differently from previous generations.

Previous research on generational differences among managers in the Chinese workplace has shown that Chinese managers aged 40 or younger have scored significantly higher on individualism and lower on Confucianism than previous generations (Ralston et al., 1999). However, this study was conducted in 1999 when the new generation at that time consisted of people born in the 1960s, who were also influenced by economic reform and the open-up policy in 1978 when they were 20 years old. Due to the radical social and economic changes in the past century, scholars such as Martinsons and Tseng (1995) have suggested that generational differences in ethical values may exist. Based on research by Martinsons and Ma (2009), significant events in Chinese contemporary history that potentially cause generational differences include the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, the Cultural Revolution in 1966, and the One-Child Policy and the open-up economic reform in 1978 and 1979. People born during these periods may be expected to be influenced by these events in their behaviours, attitudes, values, and beliefs (Martinsons and Ma, 2009). Martinsons and Ma (2009) classified generations into three groups: those born before 1950 as a Republican group, those born

between 1950-1970 as a revolution group, and those born after 1970 as a reform group. They compared different groups based on their concern for self-interest, social relationships, rules and laws, majority rights, and equity and fairness. The results highlighted the significant role of subculture theory, with younger generations showing greater concern for self-interest and majority rights (Martinsons and Ma, 2009). However, their research did not specifically mention the new generation born after the 1980s, and they only focused on the IT industry, which requires further research to provide a comprehensive understanding.

Based on data from labour strikes over the past ten years, generational differences potentially influence the form of labour strikes. For example, in the research on the Honda strike in 2010, most strikes in Chinese organizations focused on payment and mistreatment, but the Honda strike had a new purpose: workers wanted to democratically elect union leaders (Barboza, 2010). Scholars have argued based on observations of this event that the new generation of workers is distinctly different from previous generations, leading to different demands and behaviours (Chan, 2011; Chan, 2012; Pringle, 2011).

Since the open-up policy in China, many Western concepts have been introduced into Chinese social sciences vocabulary, potentially influencing young age groups in terms of "collective bargaining" and "union democracy." As this generation grows up, these concepts gradually become their demands and goals. When this new generation gains social power in their middle age, the changes they bring to the employment relationship perspective will be worth exploring. As the subculture theory suggests, one's childhood and adolescence have a greater influence on their ethics compared to other periods of life (Inglehart, 1997). People born in the 1960s experienced economic reform during their adolescence, which caused differences compared to previous generations. Those born after the 1980s experienced both economic reform and a relatively freer environment from 2002 to 2012 during their childhood and adolescence, potentially leading to further generational differences. With the renewal of labour law and the development of grassroots working-class protests, the previous employment relationship based on authoritarian values is facing challenges. The new generations born after the 1980s may exhibit a higher acceptance of egalitarian values and a more open-minded attitude toward collective voice and independent union activities. This research aims to provide evidence of this possibility, which will be an important factor in predicting the future path of collective voice in the Chinese context.

#### 2.5.8: Section conclusion:

In this section, I focus on the event from cultural revolution to the golden age of working-class spontaneous empowerment that could be considered as the triggers for ethical change that threaten the legitimacy of hierarchical system. On the hand, the economic reform and legislative development provide opportunities for working-class empowerment. On the other hand, the spontaneous efforts through collective actions from working class confirm their ethical renewal. The previous generational research and theories further provide theoretical support on ethical shift from old to younger generations. For the next chapter, I am focusing on the research methodology indicating how I manifest this ethical shift through generations.

From now on, I have finished the discussion on literature review which contain four sections. In the first chapter, I provide an introduction of labour resistance activity in the Chinese context and identify the absolute power from political authority that manipulate the path of collective voice especially for the voice and action of Chinese working class in different period. In the second chapter, I discuss the unavoidable struggling of union leading by capital domination. I identify the main challenge of collective voice root in the acceptance on hierarchical concept, which determined by hierarchical social system in both authoritarian and democratic place. In the third chapter, I focus on the discussion of hierarchical system and indicate the strong counter-acting force from social ethics to influence institutional facts. In the final chapter, I review the context of China, identifying the potential even that may change the ethics of working class though different generation, which engage the power

of collective voice and provide opportunity for establishing of independent union in future China. For the next, I will discuss the methodology of this research to figure out what research method that I have been using to the research question about whether ethical change though generation exist from Chinese working class.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

#### 3.1 Introduction:

Scholars have often assumed that Chinese workers show a degree of passivity, but my findings, based on the methodological approach outlined here, reveal something different. While it would be too broad to claim that every individual born after 1980 has changed their workplace values around hierarchy and collective voice, my interviews indicate a nascent generational shift.

This study adopts an interpretivist research design, as it is the most appropriate approach for exploring generational changes in values and ethics. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect qualitative data, allowing a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives on hierarchy, ethics, and collective action. Traditional interviews also complemented this process by providing more specific insights into the activities of the Chinese working class.

The fieldwork was conducted in a dormitory building in Nantong, used by a motor oil company. According to the employer, these residents were "workers," but the interviews showed that they were mostly casual labourers, many of whom had changed jobs several times, apart from the few who had just entered the labour market. Given the shared social background, these newcomers are likely to follow in the footsteps of their predecessors. Many participants referred to the company as a "temporary harbour." This research therefore focuses on the Chinese 'new working class', as defined in the previous chapter.

#### 3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Compared with the positivist approach, interpretivist research offers deeper insights into social phenomena by exploring individuals' lived experiences and personal stories rather than focusing only on objective facts. This kind of understanding provides a fuller picture of social issues and can support the development of theory (Denzin, 2001). Denzin also notes that the "semi" in semi-structured interviews reflects the interpretivist tradition, as it allows more flexibility and a more ethically sensitive research agenda than the fixed format of closed questionnaires or standard surveys.

Research ethics, in this context, involve both emotional and rational aspects for researchers and

participants (Haidt, 2012; Kahneman, 2011; Prinz, 2007; Nussbaum, 2001; Damasio, 1994). Some scholars argue that rational considerations are not always necessary for ethical judgment, since emotions and intuitions often play a decisive role (Greene, 2013; Churchland, 2011; Prinz, 2007; Damasio, 1994; Blackburn, 1984). This helps to explain the limitations of purely positivist approaches. At the same time, traditional interpretive interviews relying only on open-ended questions may also face challenges, because ethical judgments are often based on intuitive or emotional responses rather than fully articulated reasoning. For example, questions such as “why is it wrong to kill” may be answered not through logical analysis, but through an emotional sense of the value of human life. Similarly, when I asked my interviewees why they chose certain behaviours, their answers were often simple, such as “I think it is the right thing to do,” which reflects Haidt’s (2012) observation that moral judgments are often driven by quick intuitive responses. This is one of the reasons why semi-structured interviews were selected for this study.

Another reason for adopting semi-structured interviews is the issue of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). People may not fully understand complex concepts, or may hold views that contradict their own behaviour. For example, when asked about hierarchy, interviewees might express agreement with the system in principle, but their behaviour sometimes undermined it. Likewise, “union” in China is usually understood as the ACFTU, which differs from the Western definition. Direct questions such as “what do you think about unions?” often produced confused answers. Instead, scenario-based questions such as “would you take part in certain anti-hierarchical behaviours?” were more effective in drawing out participants’ values, even if they did not consciously frame them as such (Diefenbach, 2013).

This method also helps address issues of reliability in the Chinese cultural context. In collectivist societies (Hofstede, 1980), respondents may discuss survey questions with friends or colleagues before answering, or give “safe” responses to avoid conflict with authority. Since my research deals with sensitive topics such as hierarchy and union activity, semi-structured interviews conducted in private were a better way to encourage independent responses and ensure greater reliability.

Finally, semi-structured interviews also allowed me to adapt my questions during the process. When participants found abstract “why” questions difficult, I changed to more concrete, scenario-based prompts. This adjustment encouraged participants to engage more, and their answers—although often short—still revealed underlying ethical orientations. This flexibility confirmed that semi-structured interviews were the most suitable method for this study.

### 3.3 Single Time Point Interviews

Single time point interviews are valued in qualitative research for their efficiency and practicality. Mann (2003) notes that such studies do not require follow-up, which enables relatively quick data collection and analysis. This makes them an attractive option for exploratory projects or where resources are limited. Their main advantage is that they capture participants’ perspectives at a specific moment, providing a useful “snapshot” for descriptive analysis. Sedgwick (2014) similarly observes that collecting data at one point in time can offer valuable insights, even if it does not track change over time. For this research, in order to discuss generational differences in values and ethical considerations, conducting interviews at a single point in time is an appropriate and effective choice.

For interpretivist research, there are other possible designs, such as longitudinal or case study approaches. I acknowledge that a longitudinal design could provide valuable insights into developmental trends and allow the examination of changes across time. However, such research would require many years to complete, which is not feasible in the context of a doctoral project. More importantly, my research question focuses on comparing generational cohorts rather than following individuals over time, so a single time point approach provides sufficient evidence to address the aims of the study. In addition, given the political sensitivity of discussing unions and hierarchy in China, repeated visits might increase the reluctance of participants to speak openly, while a one-off interview

created a safer setting for candid responses.

Using this method, data was collected from participants of different generations within the same time frame, allowing for meaningful comparison between cohorts. This research focuses on two generational groups: those born after 1980 and those born before 1980. The year 1980 was selected as the dividing line because of China's "open-up" policy and economic reforms, which significantly reshaped the social and economic environment for the working class and likely contributed to changes in values and ethical orientations, as discussed in the literature review.

### 3.4 Sampling Strategy

The data from participants were recorded according to working title, gender, working duration, and age. Age was the most important criterion, as the study focuses on generational differences in values and ethics. The other factors—working title, gender, and working duration—were considered secondary and used mainly to provide additional context in the analysis. Although all participants shared similar backgrounds as rural migrant workers or peasant-workers without access to permanent job contracts under China's hukou policy, these secondary factors may still introduce variation. While no major differences were found in this study, they may be valuable for future research.

This research focused on rural migrant workers in the city of Nantong. There were two reasons for this choice. First, the aim was to explore the potential for collective voice and independent unions from the perspective of workers' values and ethical considerations. Rural migrant workers form the largest part of China's current working class, and Nantong is one of the country's major cities with a concentration of labour-intensive factories. According to Au and Bai (2010) and official labour yearbooks (2016), since the economic reforms, almost all major labour resistance in China has come from this group. Second, research by Ramirez, Levy, Velilla, and Hughes (2010) shows that disadvantaged and stigmatized groups are more likely to engage in collective action. Rural migrant workers in Nantong clearly fall into this category: they face suppression of collective voice, job insecurity, and limited social mobility under the hukou system. At the same time, they also represent a large population with significant potential to challenge hierarchy. This makes them a particularly important group for this study.

In terms of sampling, a purposive strategy was adopted, as the research is focused on the value orientations of workers rather than the incidence of specific events such as labour protests. Participants were recruited on the basis of their generational background (born before or after 1980) and their identity as rural migrant workers. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, face-to-face interviews were not feasible, so the interviews were conducted online. My father helped to establish access by arranging a private room in a dormitory building of a motor oil company in Nantong, where participants could use his phone to speak with me via video call. This arrangement ensured both privacy and confidentiality. Although factory access was generally difficult due to management and security controls, this personal connection with the employer made it possible to conduct the research without interference.

### 3.5 Data Collection

In summary, sample No.38 declined to participate in the interview, data from No.22 was lost due to technical issues, and one participant did not complete all the questions. Therefore, the final sample size was N = 59 valid interviews, with 29 participants born after 1980 and 30 born before 1980, as shown in Table 3.1. Some participants did not have a formal job title as "workers," but their situations were comparable to rural migrant workers with temporary contracts. A small number of participants held non-worker titles, but this had little influence on the findings. Gender was also recorded as a variable for possible comparison. However, because the gender distribution was not balanced, and no clear patterns were found in relation to ethical considerations or collective action, gender differences were not developed into a separate line of analysis in this thesis.

Working duration was another piece of information collected. While age and working duration were often correlated, this was not always the case. For example, one interviewee was 51 years old but had just started her first job due to family financial issues, having been a housewife for 30 years. This case was noted as a special example but was not central to the analysis. In general, no theory was developed in this thesis to link age and working duration directly, though the data collected may provide useful insights for future research.

Table 3.1 provides a summary of the interview participants, including job title, gender, age, and working duration. This overview highlights the generational distribution that forms the basis of the analysis (29 participants born after 1980, 30 born before 1980).

Table 3.1

Interview sequence	Job Title	Gender	Age	Working duration
1.	Clerical assistant	F	30	5-6 years
2.	Clerical assistant	F	38	15 years
3.	Clerical assistant	F	34	10 years
4.	Clerical assistant	F	27	3 years
5.	Clerical assistant	F	35	10 years
6.	Clerical assistant	M	25	1 year
7.	Clerical assistant	F	36	12 years
8.	Worker	M	38	16 years
9.	Worker	F	52	Almost 30 years
10.	Worker	F	47	25 years
11.	Worker	M	48	26 years
12.	Worker	M	57	Almost 40 years
13.	Worker	M	58	40 years
14.	Chief	M	58	40 years
15.	Worker	F	51	Less than 1 year
16.	Worker	M	62	45 years
17.	Worker	M	54	30 years
18.	Worker	M	26	2 years
19.	Salesman	M	30	6 years
20.	Salesman	M	28	4 years
21.	Worker	F	25	1 year
22.	Loss	Loss	Loss	Loss
23.	Worker	M	23	Just work
24.	Worker	M	47	15 years
25.	Worker	M	57	25 years
26.	Worker	M	46	14 years
27.	Worker	F	28	5 years
28.	Worker	F	53	30 years
29.	Worker	M	56	More than 30
30.	Worker	M	31	8 years
31.	Worker	F	53	30 years

32.	Worker	M	50	30 years
33.	Clerical assistant	F	34	11 years
34.	Chief	F	34	14 years
35.	Worker	M	59	28 years
36.	Worker	F	35	12 years
37.	Worker	F	47	25 years
38.	Worker	F	46	26 years
39.	Worker	M	45	25 years
40.	Worker	M	40	20 years
41.	Worker	M	23	Just work
42.	Worker	M	53	33 years
43.	Worker	M	62	42 years
44.	Worker	M	53	33 years
45.	Workers	M	48	25 years
46.	Worker	M	26	3 years
47.	Worker	F	46	26 years
48.	Worker	M	52	More than 30
49.	Worker	M	33	10 years
50.	Worker	M	23	Just work
51.	Worker	M	23	Just work
52.	Worker	M	26	3 years
53.	Worker	M	27	4 years
54.	Worker	M	33	10 years
55.	Worker	M	48	26 years
56.	Basic manager	M	28	5 years
57.	Basic manager	M	28	5 years
58.	Worker	M	36	13 years
59.	Worker	F	52	More than 30
60.	Worker	F	49	26 years
61.	Worker	F	31	9 years
62.	Worker	F	49	26 years

### 3.6 Instrument Development

In order to understand the values and ethical considerations of individuals, it was essential to formulate questions that did not create an experience barrier, as some participants lacked direct experience with unions or hierarchical conflicts. Therefore, for the semi-structured part of the research, scenario-based questions were created that placed participants in the role of a worker within a simulated workplace situation. These scenarios were informed by previous labour resistance activities in China and were tailored, where possible, to participants' job category and position in the company. This design encouraged participants to engage with the situation and consider how they might act if faced with unjust treatment.

The questions were originally linked to three broad ethical considerations (EC) developed in Chapter 2.3, stemming from Kohlberg's (1973) theory:

EC1. Overcoming the Fear of Authority or Superiors

EC2. Abandoning the Self-Interest Principle

EC3. Pursuing Equality through Consensus Negotiation

However, during fieldwork it became clear that many participants, particularly those born before 1980, found abstract “why” questions difficult to answer. Their responses were often short evaluations such as “good” or “bad,” or simple agreement and disagreement, which confirmed earlier expectations that logical explanations might be difficult given their educational background and the sensitivity of the topic. To address this, the interviews were adjusted: instead of asking participants directly why they made a choice, they were encouraged to evaluate different options in the scenarios. This shift towards scenario-based questioning generated richer responses, as participants were more willing to discuss practical choices than abstract principles.

The revised instrument therefore combined three elements. First, a small set of open questions was used to gather supplementary information that might not emerge through scenario-based questioning. Second, the scenario-based questions encouraged participants to reflect on workplace ethics and collective action without requiring them to provide lengthy justifications. Third, participants were invited to discuss their views on different resistance strategies, including workplace petitions and online activism. This final stage helped reveal not only which forms of collective action participants preferred, but also why certain methods—such as social media-based activities—were seen as less appealing or less effective.

Overall, the adjustments to the instrument strengthened the interviews by making them more accessible and context-specific. The use of scenarios allowed participants to articulate ethical orientations and potential actions even when they struggled to explain their reasoning in abstract terms. While the design of the instrument was initially informed by the three ethical considerations above, the subsequent analysis (see Section 3.7) focuses on identifying recurring themes in participants’ responses rather than classifying them into fixed moral stages.

### 3.6 Instrument Development

To explore participants’ values and ethical considerations, the research instrument was designed to minimise potential “experience barriers.” Many workers had limited exposure to abstract discussions about hierarchy or unions, and initial pilot questions revealed that participants often struggled to respond to direct “why” questions. For this reason, the interviews were structured around scenario-based questions that placed participants in realistic workplace situations. These scenarios were informed by previous cases of labour resistance in China and tailored, where possible, to participants’ job roles.

For example, one scenario asked participants to imagine that their company had suddenly introduced a cost-cutting strategy that would reduce wages or lead to dismissals. Participants were invited to consider how they might respond—whether by joining colleagues to approach management collectively, nominating a representative to negotiate, acting individually, or doing nothing—and to discuss their reasoning. In this way, the scenarios encouraged participants to reflect on ethical and strategic choices without requiring them to engage in abstract theorising. A second scenario extended the situation by introducing interpersonal factors, such as whether the employer behaved with integrity and with hierarchical tone, to explore how participants’ evaluations of authority figures shaped their decisions. In the next part, we will focus on the detail of these two scenarios.

#### 3.6.1. Research design

The interview design was explicitly constructed with reference to three sensitising concepts: Hofstede’s (1980) theory of power distance, Kohlberg’s (1973) framework of moral reasoning, and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Foa & Foa, 1975; Lawler, 2001; Molm, 2003). These perspectives did not function as rigid categories, but they directly informed the way scenarios were built and provided lenses for interpreting participants’ responses.

Kohlberg's framework of moral reasoning sensitized the interpretation of the moral depth behind these choices. It enabled distinctions between reasoning rooted in fear and self-preservation, reasoning based on reciprocity and conditional solidarity, and reasoning framed in terms of abstract principles of fairness and justice.

Hofstede's theory of power distance shaped the design of the first scenario, which asked how workers would respond to a conflict with their boss. The assumption was that willingness or reluctance to face authority reflects different orientations toward power distance. Those who avoided voice demonstrated a high acceptance of hierarchy, while those who felt able to speak up reflected a lower acceptance. Therefore, in the first scenario we assess whether participants have overcome fear when facing authority.

Social exchange theory informed the second scenario, which introduced variations in the boss's integrity and speaking style. This theory highlights that authority is not judged solely by outcomes, but also by the perceived quality of the interaction. Honesty, integrity, and respectful speech function as "social currencies," and workers use them to evaluate whether authority is morally legitimate. In this way, social exchange theory provided an essential complement to Kohlberg. It explained how workers assessed authority in concrete interactions: honesty and fairness justified cooperation, while dishonesty or disrespect invalidated it. This helped to clarify the difference between what can be termed a social-mind orientation—where reciprocity and trust legitimize collective voice—and a consensus orientation, where authority is judged by whether interactions embody equality and fairness.

According to Kohlberg (1973), attentiveness to others' integrity reflects an other-regarding moral stance and can signal a greater propensity for collective orientation within social networks. Because it indicates whether the participant will show empathy to others. To notice and care about someone else's integrity, an actor must first take the other's point of view and recognize their rights and commitments, then experience concern when those are breached (Davis, 1983; Batson, 2011). From a social exchange perspective, honesty and promise-keeping function as social currencies that license cooperation by signaling trust and obligation (Blau, 1964; Foa & Foa, 1975; Molm, 2003). Therefore, attentiveness to others' integrity directly can be regarded as a strong signal for collective action and concern for others.

Then, a consensus orientation can be inferred from how people evaluate speaking style in authority encounters: actors who endorse equality of standing are more sensitive to hierarchical tones (e.g., direct orders without explanation during change). According to Hofstede (1980), individuals who endorse equality of standing—conceptually close to low power-distance orientation who expect equal relationship will feel uncomfortable under hierarchical tone. Therefore, observing how participants respond to different speaking tones within the scenario allows us to infer their valuation of equality. Within this interpretive frame, we can read participants' values and ethical considerations from two interactional cues in second scenario: (1) whether integrity/honesty legitimizes cooperation (self-interest vs concern for others), and (2) whether respectful, equality-affirming speech is treated as a precondition for legitimate authority (Consensus and equality).

Taken together, the two scenarios were not arbitrary but theory-driven constructions, designed to probe authority relations from different angles. The first scenario tested whether workers could overcome fear of hierarchy, while the second examined how authority was morally appraised through signals of fairness and respect indicate their tendency on collective action and equality value. By combining these responses, it was possible to trace a continuum of orientations toward authority and fairness, ranging from fearful obedience to principled egalitarianism. The full set of scenario questions is provided in Appendix X.

In addition to these scenario-based prompts, a small number of open-ended questions were included

to gather supplementary information, such as participants' general views on unions or hierarchy. The interviews concluded by asking participants to evaluate a range of possible resistance strategies, including collective negotiation, reliance on third-party mediators, online activism, and disengaged or passive approaches. This structure made it possible to capture a spectrum of perspectives, from traditional collective action to newer, digitally mediated forms of resistance.

Overall, the instrument was designed to balance open and structured elements. The use of scenarios enabled participants to articulate values and ethical orientations more clearly, even when they found abstract reasoning difficult. While the scenarios were initially informed by the three ethical considerations developed in Chapter 2.3 (EC1–EC3), in this thesis they are treated not as rigid categories but as simplified sensitising concepts derived from Kohlberg's (1973) theory of moral development. Together with Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimension of power distance, these concepts served as analytical lenses to guide the interpretation of themes.

See table 3.2:

**Table 3.2 Analytical Lenses for Data Interpretation**

Analytical Focus	Related Theoretical Reference	Illustrative Dimension	Relevance for this Study
Fear of authority (EC1)	Hofstede (1980) - Power Distance	Acceptance of unequal power relations	Helps interpret workers' responses indicating deference or resistance to hierarchy
Self-interest vs. concern for others (EC2)	Kohlberg (1973) - Stage 2 - 3 (from self-interest to interpersonal concordance)	From self-serving orientation to concern for community	Explains variation in whether participants prioritise personal benefit or solidarity
Consensus and equality (EC3)	Kohlberg (1973) - Stage 5 (Social-contract orientation); simplified as EC3	Emphasis on fairness, cooperation, and collective negotiation	Provides a lens to interpret participants' emphasis on equality and cooperative strategies

### 3.7 Data Analysis Plan

The interview data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach, which is well suited to exploring the ways in which participants articulated values and ethical orientations. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, the transcripts were read and re-read to gain familiarity with the material. Initial codes were then developed to capture features of the data that related to hierarchy, workplace ethics, and collective action. These codes were refined and grouped into broader themes through an iterative process, which involved moving back and forth between the raw data, the research questions, and the theoretical lenses introduced earlier in this chapter. The final themes

provided an interpretive structure that reflected participants' lived experiences while situating them within wider cultural and ethical frameworks.

The analytical lenses outlined in Table 3.2 were central in guiding this process. Hofstede's (1980) dimension of power distance drew attention to participants' acceptance or rejection of unequal authority relations, which was especially relevant in responses that revealed either deference or resistance to superiors. Kohlberg's (1973) stages of moral development offered a broader interpretive background for understanding whether participants' reasoning was primarily self-serving (Stage 2), relational and community-focused (Stage 3), or grounded in principles of fairness and consensus (Stage 5). The three simplified ethical considerations (EC1–EC3), presented in Chapter 2.3 as derivatives of Kohlberg's model, were employed as sensitizing concepts to make the analysis of worker narratives more accessible and focused. This means that they helped orient the analysis toward recurring ethical orientations—overcoming fear of authority, moving beyond self-interest, and seeking consensus—without being used as rigid categories into which participants were placed.

On this basis, four interrelated themes were identified:

Fear of authority and hierarchical power (EC1, linked to Hofstede's power distance): Participants often described situations where they hesitated to confront superiors or felt compelled to comply with orders. At the same time, some narratives indicated moments of resistance or quiet defiance. This theme captures how authority was experienced as both an obstacle and, occasionally, a site of challenge.

Self-interest versus concern for others (EC2, linked to Kohlberg's Stage 2–3): A recurrent distinction emerged between those who emphasised personal survival or advancement and those who showed solidarity with colleagues. For example, some participants justified inaction by focusing on their own security, while others emphasised the importance of collective well-being. This theme highlights the tension between individual and collective orientations in ethical reasoning.

Consensus and equality in decision-making (EC3, linked to Kohlberg's Stage 5): Several accounts emphasised the importance of fairness, cooperative negotiation, and equality in workplace relations. Here, participants framed their reasoning around principles of shared decision-making and respect for collective outcomes. This theme highlights the ethical orientation towards consensus as a guiding principle in workplace resistance and negotiation.

Perceptions of online activism (emerging theme): Beyond the dimensions captured by EC1–EC3, participants also reflected on the role of digital strategies. Some expressed scepticism about online resistance, doubting its impact or safety, while others acknowledged its potential for raising awareness and connecting dispersed workers. This theme recognises the significance of new, digitally mediated forms of activism in contemporary China.

These themes were shaped by both the design of the scenarios (see Section 3.6) and the recurrence of patterns during coding. For instance, when asked to imagine facing a pay cut or dismissal, participants' narratives revealed either compliance, cautious negotiation, or collective resolve, which mapped onto the lenses of fear of authority, self-interest versus solidarity, and consensus. When participants were invited to consider alternative strategies, discussions about fairness and cooperation became more prominent, while reflections on online activism emerged as a distinct and contemporary theme.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, open coding was carried out to capture all instances where participants described workplace dilemmas, ethical reasoning, or strategies of action. Second, these codes were systematically grouped into the themes outlined above, guided by the analytical lenses in Table 3.2. Finally, the themes were compared across generational cohorts (born before 1980 vs. born after 1980), allowing the study to identify both continuities and contrasts in how different

generations articulated values, ethics, and strategies of resistance.

In sum, this analysis plan enabled the study to capture the complexity, nuance, and generational variation in workers' ethical reasoning. By organising the data around themes informed by sensitising concepts, the study avoided rigid categorisation and instead produced an account that reflects both the lived realities of Chinese workers and the theoretical insights drawn from Kohlberg and Hofstede. These themes form the basis for the findings presented in Chapter 4.

### 3.8 Reliability and Confidentiality

All interview sessions were conducted in a private and secure setting to minimise the risk of disruption and ensure confidentiality. Participants joined the interviews using a private phone line in a room where no third parties were present. Before the interviews commenced, all participants provided informed consent by signing the Participant Consent Form. To further protect anonymity, no identifying information was matched with the interview data, in accordance with participants' requests.

### 3.9 Data Protection and Ethics

All interview data were securely stored on the researcher's password-protected computer and encrypted to ensure data protection. Participants are referred to by pseudonyms that bear no direct relation to their identities. Supporting documents, including the ethics approval and consent form, are provided in Appendix B.

Prior to conducting the interviews, ethical clearance was obtained from the School of Management Ethics Officer at the University of Leicester and subsequently verified by the University of Essex. An online ethical approval application was submitted on 13 May 2020, which detailed the procedures for data collection, informed consent, and participant protection.

### 3.10 Limitations

The main limitation of this research relates to the diversity of the sample. The design prioritised a 1:1 balance between participants born before 1980 and those born after 1980, to facilitate generational comparison. However, other demographic variables such as gender, job title, and employment duration were not evenly distributed. While these characteristics provide useful contextual information, they were not the central focus of the analysis. Future research could extend the scope by systematically examining how these demographic factors intersect with ethical orientations.

A further limitation concerns the difficulty of including participants born in the 1990s. Within the factory context of this study, very few individuals from this age group were available. Possible explanations include the effects of the one-child policy introduced in 1982, which gradually reduced the younger labour pool, or broader industrial restructuring in the region. These issues lie beyond the scope of the present research but suggest important directions for further investigation.

Finally, as the fieldwork was conducted in the city of Nantong, the findings reflect the social and industrial context of this locality. Extending the research to include participants from other Chinese cities would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of ethical considerations shaping workers' collective voice across different regions.

### 3.11 Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the methodological framework underpinning the study and demonstrated how it aligns with the research aims. It began by setting out the interpretivist orientation and explaining its relevance for exploring workers' values and ethical reasoning. The use of semi-structured

interviews and a single time-point approach was then introduced, followed by a description of the sampling strategy and data collection procedures. Careful attention was given to the development of the interview instrument, particularly the use of scenario-based questions, which were designed to reduce experiential barriers and enable participants to articulate their perspectives more effectively.

The chapter also detailed the analytical framework, which drew on thematic analysis supported by sensitising concepts derived from Kohlberg's moral development theory and Hofstede's cultural dimensions. These concepts provided interpretive lenses for identifying patterns in the data and situating participants' accounts within broader ethical and cultural contexts. Table 3.2 summarised these lenses and clarified their role in guiding the analysis.

Ethical procedures were described in relation to informed consent, anonymity, and data protection, with pseudonyms used for all participants and secure storage measures implemented. These steps ensured that the research was conducted in accordance with institutional requirements and with respect for participants' rights.

Finally, the chapter acknowledged several limitations, including imbalances in demographic diversity, challenges in accessing younger participants, and the geographical focus on Nantong. Recognising these boundaries clarifies the scope of the study and highlights areas for future inquiry.

Taken together, the methodological choices outlined here provide a clear basis for the analysis that follows. The next chapter presents the findings, organised around the key themes identified in the data, and examines how different generations of Chinese workers understand hierarchy, ethics, and collective action.

## [Chapter 4: Findings on ethical consideration](#)

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the empirical findings of my study on generational shifts in values and ethical considerations among Chinese workers, with particular attention to how these shifts may shape the future of collective voice and independent trade unions. The analysis is based on 59 semi-structured interviews with workers born both before and after 1980. The year 1980 serves as a generational dividing line because it coincides with China's "open-up" reforms, a turning point that reshaped the working lives and ethical orientations of the Chinese labour force.

The interviews were conducted in private settings to encourage open reflection on sensitive topics such as hierarchy, fairness, and collective action. Scenario-based questions were particularly effective in drawing out participants' ethical reasoning. When faced with hypothetical workplace dilemmas, workers often responded with concise yet revealing statements—phrases such as "I should ask the boss", "I don't want trouble", or "If we go together, it feels fairer." These short replies, though simple on the surface, provided insight into how participants framed authority, fairness, and risk in their everyday working lives.

The findings are interpreted through three key sensitising concepts introduced earlier in the thesis: Kohlberg's theory (1973) of moral reasoning, Diefenbach's theory of hierarchy, and Hofstede's cultural dimension of power distance. These theoretical lenses help illuminate how participants made sense of authority, responsibility, and fairness, without imposing rigid categories on their responses. For example, Kohlberg's framework sheds light on whether workers framed decisions in terms of self-interest, conformity, or principles of justice; Hofstede's concept of power distance helps explain why

some participants treated obedience as natural prudence while others justified respectful dissent.

The interviews reveal both continuities and contrasts across generations. Many older workers described hierarchy as inevitable and saw avoidance of confrontation as the safest path, often linked to family responsibilities and fear of losing employment. Younger workers, while still cautious, more frequently introduced fairness, reciprocity, and the possibility of acting collectively. At the same time, fear of authority and the risk of retaliation remained strong deterrents across both groups. This mixture of continuity and change underscores the complexity of generational ethics in China: values are shifting, but not in a uniform or linear way.

To capture this complexity, the chapter is organised around four themes that emerged from the data:  
(NEED TO MODIFY)

1. Authority and Fear of Superiors (EC1) – how workers described hierarchy, obedience, and the conditions under which fear could be overcome.

2. Self-interest versus Solidarity (EC2) – how participants balanced personal security and family obligations against the pull of collective responsibility.

3. Repertoires of Collective Action (EC3) – the strategies workers considered viable, such as negotiation, mediation, strikes, or exit.

Each theme is illustrated with anonymised excerpts from participants' accounts, showing how workers narrated their reasoning and choices in their own words. The emphasis is on interpretation: rather than measuring how many participants held a particular view, the analysis seeks to understand the meanings workers attached to their experiences and how these meanings differed across generational cohorts.

Importantly, the interviews revealed a spectrum of orientations toward authority and fairness, ranging from silence and obedience to principles of collective negotiation. This spectrum will be explored thematically in the sections that follow, highlighting both the persistence of hierarchical ethics and the emergence of more egalitarian orientations among younger workers.

The chapter concludes by synthesising these themes to show how generational differences in ethics may influence the prospects for independent unionism in China. While institutional barriers remain formidable, the narratives of younger workers suggest a gradual reorientation toward fairness, reciprocity, and cautious collective action. These findings highlight the ethical dimension of labour activism as a crucial but under explored factor in understanding the possibilities for collective voice in contemporary China.

## 4.2 Orientations Toward Authority and Fairness

To interpret how participants talked about authority, fairness and collective action, this study draws on three ethical considerations developed in the conceptual framework:

EC1: Overcoming the fear of authority or superiors – the willingness to approach, question or negotiate with superiors rather than remaining silent.

EC2: Moving beyond a purely self-serving principle – recognising and acting on shared or collective interests, rather than treating problems as exclusively individual.

EC3: Pursuing equality through consensus-oriented negotiation – viewing conflict resolution as

something that should be organised through fair procedures among recognised equals, potentially including representative or collective voice.

Rather than treating these considerations as formal “stages” or measurement scales, they are used as sensitising concepts to organise patterns in the interview narratives. Reading across both cohorts (born before and after 1980), the analysis identifies five recurrent orientations toward authority and collective voice: Obedience and Silence, Fearful Compliance, Cautious Individual Fairness, Conditional Solidarity, and Principled Egalitarianism. These orientations indicate different combinations of EC1–EC3 and form a continuum rather than rigid categories.

#### 4.2.1 Scenario discussion

##### 4.2.1.1 Scenario One: Facing the boss

When asked how they would react in a workplace conflict, participants demonstrated strikingly different levels of comfort with hierarchy. Some admitted they would remain silent or withdraw completely: “I dare not say anything,” or “It is not my place to speak.” These narratives expressed not only strategic caution but also a deeply internalised belief that challenging authority was illegitimate or unsafe. Authority was seen as beyond question, and deference was framed as common sense.

At the opposite end, some participants were confident in approaching their boss directly. They said things like “I should ask the boss” or “I can go and talk to him,” indicating that they viewed voice as an acceptable option, even without support. A few went further, positioning themselves as informal representatives of their peers: “If they need me to, I can say it for them.” Here, fairness and accountability were extended beyond the self to include colleagues, signalling a willingness to shoulder responsibility for others.

Between these extremes lay more cautious narratives. Several participants said they would raise concerns with their boss but preferred to keep the matter private, avoiding disclosure to colleagues. This approach allowed them to pursue personal fairness while minimising collective exposure. Such accounts highlight the complexity of authority relations: workers could cross the threshold of speaking up, but still resisted extending responsibility to the group.

##### 4.2.1.2 Scenario Two: Honesty, tone, and moral judgement

The second scenario introduced cues about the boss’s integrity and speaking style. These small details became central markers of whether authority was judged as legitimate.

For many, integrity was decisive. An honest, trustworthy boss legitimised engagement: “If he is fair and keeps his word, then I will talk with him.” A dishonest boss, by contrast, was described as undeserving of dialogue, because dishonesty violated expectations of fairness and reciprocity. In this sense, integrity was not simply a personal trait but a moral signal: it revealed whether authority could be recognised as just.

Speaking style was equally powerful. A respectful tone was taken as recognition of equality, while rudeness or dismissal was read as a denial of dignity. As one participant explained, “If he talks down to me, it shows he doesn’t see me as equal.” Others added that they could accept unfavourable outcomes if treated respectfully, but they would resist or disengage if spoken to with contempt. Here, communication style functioned as an ethical touchstone, shaping whether workers viewed the relationship as one of fairness or domination.

These accounts demonstrate that participants were not simply calculating risks or outcomes. They were evaluating the moral quality of interaction: Was the authority figure acting with integrity? Was respect for dignity present? In this way, authority was judged through everyday cues of honesty and tone, which carried profound ethical meaning.

#### 4.2.2 A continuum of orientations

Taken together, the two scenarios reveal that participants' orientations toward authority can be mapped along a continuum. This continuum does not represent fixed "stages" but rather a spectrum of moral reasoning, ranging from fearful obedience at one end to principled egalitarianism at the other.

##### 4.2.2.1 Obedience and Silence

Ethical considerations: Does not reliably demonstrate EC1, EC2 or EC3.

Meaning: Participants in this orientation tend to accept hierarchical decisions, avoid raising concerns, and sometimes describe it as "not my place to speak" or "wrong to question a superior". Deference is narrated as common sense or necessity. Fear of consequences and strong norm acceptance combine to suppress both individual voice and collective concern.

##### 4.2.2.2 Fearful Compliance

Ethical considerations: Shows emerging moral awareness, but fails EC1 and does not consistently enact EC2 or EC3.

Meaning: These participants recognise unfairness and may privately disagree, but still choose endurance because of risk, responsibility for family, or anticipated retaliation. They display moral sensitivity without effective voice: fear overrides action. Compared with Obedience and Silence, they question hierarchy internally, but do not cross the threshold into confident engagement or solidaristic behaviour.

##### 4.2.2.3 Cautious Individual Fairness

Ethical considerations: Meets EC1, but not EC2 or EC3.

Meaning: These participants are willing to face the boss directly and seek clarification or redress, usually in a private, low-exposure way. They emphasise "my problem", "my rights", "my treatment", and often choose not to share information with colleagues. Their reasoning centres on personal fairness and controlled risk. They overcome fear of authority (EC1), but their concern remains largely self-regarding, and they do not yet frame issues in terms of collective interest or egalitarian procedure.

##### 4.2.2.4 Conditional Solidarity

Ethical considerations: Meets EC1 and EC2, and shows partial/conditional EC3.

Meaning: Conditional solidarity participants have largely overcome fear of authority (EC1) and display genuine concern for others (EC2), particularly when colleagues or managers are seen to act with integrity. In the scenarios, they adjust their stance in response to integrity cues—for example, showing greater willingness to support "those who did the right thing" and questioning unfair sanctions against them. They recognise negotiation and certain forms of collective or representative action as appropriate means to pursue fairness, thereby exhibiting elements of EC3. However, their solidarity is conditional: it is more readily extended to those regarded as "deserving" or norm-compliant, and

held back from those viewed as irresponsible or value-distant. They therefore provide an important moral basis for collective action, but their solidarity remains bounded by expectations of reciprocity and shared norms, rather than grounded in a fully universalised commitment to equality.

#### 4.2.2.5 Principled Egalitarianism

Ethical considerations: Meets EC1, EC2 and EC3.

Meaning: Participants in this orientation consistently justify their views with principles of equality, fairness, and due process. They accept neither unquestioned hierarchy nor purely self-interested calculation. They affirm that problems affecting workers should be addressed through transparent, consensus-based negotiation, often including representative or collective mechanisms, and they are prepared, at least in principle, to contribute to such efforts. This orientation is analytically closest to a social-contract view of authority and provides the strongest normative basis for sustained collective action.

#### 4.2.3 Transitions and generational contrasts

The continuum is not a rigid typology. Workers could move across positions depending on context. A participant who typically kept silent might still support colleagues in extreme cases, while one who usually framed fairness individually might shift toward solidarity when reciprocity was assured. What the continuum reveals is not fixed categories but moral logics—different ways in which workers justified or rejected obedience, fairness, solidarity, or equality.

Generational differences were evident across this continuum. Older participants more often placed themselves at the obedient or fearful end, stressing prudence, duty, and risk avoidance. Younger participants were more likely to describe solidarity, fairness, and reciprocity, and a small number articulated principled commitments to equality and negotiation. These contrasts do not represent a simple generational break, but they suggest a gradual reorientation among younger workers toward more egalitarian and participatory ethics.

### 4.3 The Spectrum of Worker Responses

#### 4.3.1 Silence and Obedience: Voices of Fear

Post-1980: No.19

Pre-1980: No.2, No.12, No.13, No.16, No.44

At the furthest end of the continuum were participants whose accounts revealed what can be described as an “obedience and silence” orientation. Workers in this group portrayed themselves as unable or unwilling to confront their superiors under any circumstances. Their answers to the first scenario displayed a strong sense of deference to authority, and the variations in the second scenario—whether the boss acted with integrity or spoke respectfully—did not alter their stance.

This orientation was far more common among the older group. Among those born before 1980, 5 out of 31 respondents fell into this pattern (e.g. No.2, No.12, No.13, No.16, No.44). By contrast, among the post-1980 participants, only 1 out of 29 respondents could be placed here (No.19). This difference suggests that unquestioning obedience is still present, but its prevalence appears to be declining among younger workers, even though fear of authority continues to shape their moral reasoning.

Several older respondents described obedience as the only possible option. One woman asked the interviewer directly, “How can we evaluate the boss?” (No.16, female, pre-1980 cohort). Her question implied that employees lacked the authority even to form judgements about their superiors.

Another older participant repeatedly refused to comment on the boss's integrity or tone, saying, "I think I have nothing to say; I am quite afraid to answer these questions." (No.44, female, pre-1980 cohort). These narratives illustrate a deeply internalised acceptance of hierarchy and resonate with Hofstede's notion of high power distance. They also align with what Kohlberg described as a punishment-and-obedience orientation, where moral reasoning is dominated by anxiety about sanction.

The younger respondent who displayed this orientation explained it differently. Rather than presenting obedience as morally correct, this participant indicated that if the boss could not be confronted, he would simply leave the organisation (No.19, male, post-1980 cohort). In his account, obedience was not moralised as the "right way" to behave; instead, exit was framed as the only viable option when direct voice felt impossible. This response shows that while fear still inhibited confrontation, obedience was no longer accepted as legitimate. Withdrawal, rather than deference, became the preferred form of self-protection.

Taken together, these accounts highlight how obedience and silence remain powerful moral orientations in the workplace. For older workers, deference to superiors was normalised and moralised: silence was seen as prudence, respect, and the proper way to behave. For younger workers, fear persisted, but obedience was less naturalised. Instead, leaving the organisation emerged as a dignified alternative to unquestioning compliance. This subtle generational shift suggests that while hierarchy continues to shape ethical reasoning, the hold of absolute obedience may be loosening across cohorts.

#### 4.3.2 Fearful Compliance: Between Fear and Conditional Ethics

Post-1980: No.3, No.4, No.7, No.18, No.20, No.27, No.30, No.33, No.51, No.53

Pre-1980: No.9, No.10, No.15, No.17, No.24, No.26, No.28, No.32, No.36

Participants in this orientation continue to display a high acceptance of hierarchy and a strong fear of confronting superiors. In the first scenario, they typically avoided standing up to their boss alone and leaned towards responses that preserved distance, minimised exposure, or quietly endured decisions they experienced as unfair. These accounts reflect deep-seated deference and self-abasement in relation to authority, consistent with a high power-distance mindset.

However, their responses to the follow-up scenarios reveal that this deference is not unconditional. When variations in the employer's integrity or speaking style were introduced, many stated that under certain conditions—such as clear dishonesty, broken promises, or openly humiliating treatment—they would no longer simply obey, but would look for alternative ways to respond: reconsidering their cooperation, withdrawing effort, seeking other jobs, or quietly aligning with critical colleagues. In other words, while fear of authority remains strong and EC1 (overcoming fear) is not fully realised, their reactions nonetheless show emerging elements of EC2 (concern beyond pure self-interest) and, in some cases, a nascent egalitarian sensitivity associated with EC3. This combination of strong fear with conditional moral resistance is what marks this group as fearful compliance rather than pure obedience and silence.

Within the younger cohort, several participants in this orientation showed clear signs of EC2 (abandoning a purely self-serving principle). Interviewees such as No.3, No.4, No.7, No.18, No.20 and No.27 adjusted their views when integrity was at stake: they were more inclined to support or protect those who had "done the right thing" and more critical of unfair treatment, indicating that their reasoning extended beyond narrow personal interest. Their narratives suggest an emerging social-mindedness, even though fear of authority continued to limit how far this concern could be acted upon.

A smaller group of younger participants in the same orientation—No.30, No.33, No.51 and No.53—went further, combining concern for others (EC2) with a more explicit egalitarian, negotiation-based outlook (EC3). They stressed that dishonest or disrespectful conduct by superiors undermined the legitimacy of obedience, and they articulated honest negotiation as the appropriate way to resolve disputes. In their accounts, authority was subject to conditions: to be obeyed, it had to meet standards of integrity, respect and procedural fairness. This indicates movement towards a more principled evaluation of hierarchy, even if their practical options remained constrained.

However, these ethical orientations did not automatically translate into trust in collective action. Notably, No.18 and No.20—both of whom expressed empathy for colleagues and a concern for fairness—still refrained from endorsing any form of overt collective initiative. They preferred low-exposure responses such as private discussion or personal withdrawal and expressed scepticism about the effectiveness or safety of collective organising. In other words, they accepted many of the ethical premises that could support collective voice, but withheld confidence in unions or collective action as viable instruments. Given that spontaneous union activities are widely perceived as politically sensitive or even unlawful in China, such distrust is understandable and cannot be reduced to a lack of ethical commitment. This study therefore treats their reluctance primarily as a context-shaped constraint rather than an absence of EC2 or EC3. The broader political and institutional reasons for distrust in collective action lie beyond the scope of this thesis, but they are an important backdrop for interpreting these findings.

Within the older cohort, the pattern was similarly mixed but leaned more visibly toward accepting collective action as a possible response. A small number of participants, such as No.17, No.26 and No.28, primarily demonstrated EC2: they showed concern for others and adjusted their judgements in light of integrity issues, but their support for collective initiatives remained hesitant and heavily constrained by fear. Others, including No.32 and No.15, displayed more of EC3 than EC2: they expressed strong egalitarian expectations toward authority and were willing, at least in principle, to resist illegitimate commands, yet their concern for colleagues as a group was weak. For them, opposition to hierarchy appeared highly individualised—a readiness to push back for themselves rather than to sustain solidarity for others.

The cases of No.32 and No.15 are particularly illustrative. In the initial scenarios, their choices were not clearly influenced by questions of integrity; they did not automatically differentiate between honest and dishonest superiors. However, when confronted with overtly hierarchical or demeaning speech, their sensitivity to integrity and respect was “switched on”: disrespect, combined with perceived dishonesty, became a trigger for rejection of obedience and, in No.15’s case, for participation in collective action. This suggests that they hold egalitarian values, but their orientation to others is selective. Any involvement in collective acts is best understood as a situational reaction—a response to personal humiliation or broken trust—rather than as a durable commitment to collective voice. In summary, individuals such as No.32 and No.15 oppose hierarchical domination, but they tend to remain at a distance from sustained collective action, engaging when hierarchy violates their own moral threshold rather than from a stable, solidaristic ethic.

Another special case is No.28. Although her responses were formally sensitive to both integrity and speaking style, her reaction to a domineering attitude from her superior did not lead to resistance but to continued obedience. She accepted even harsh or unequal treatment without expressing discomfort or inclination to challenge it. This pattern indicates a strong fear of authority and a high power-distance orientation: integrity and tone are noticed, but not used as grounds to withhold obedience or to claim equality. For this reason, No.28 cannot be regarded as fulfilling EC3; her stance remains firmly within fearful compliance rather than egalitarian negotiation.

With respect to distrust of collective action, several older participants—most clearly No.26, No.28 and No.32—expressed doubts about the safety, legality or effectiveness of collective initiatives, even

when they were critical of unfair treatment. Their reluctance underlines how structural risk and political constraints limit the translation of ethical concerns into collective engagement. By contrast, within the younger cohort, almost all participants discussed above demonstrated at least some form of empathy or concern for others, thereby meeting EC2 as a potential basis for solidarity, even if a number of them, like No.18 and No.20, remained sceptical about collective action in practice. Compared with older participants such as No.32 and No.15, whose concern for others was notably weaker and whose opposition to hierarchy remained highly individualised, the younger group's broader readiness to recognise others' claims can be read—cautiously—as a more favourable ethical climate for future union-related activities, even under continuing institutional constraints.

Participants in this orientation demonstrate elements of the ethical considerations that could, in principle, support collective action, but they encounter a decisive barrier: they cannot overcome their fear and self-abasement toward authoritarian superiors. Persistent anxiety about punishment, damage to reputation, or wider consequences means that, even when they recognise unfairness or feel empathy for others, they remain detached from any sustained form of anti-hierarchical behaviour or collective initiative. Their position illustrates how ethical awareness alone is insufficient when fear continues to structure what is seen as realistic or permissible.

As outlined in the literature review, this thesis treats the first two ethical considerations—overcoming fear of authority (EC1) and moving beyond purely self-serving reasoning (EC2)—as necessary conditions for organising collective, union-like activities. This raises an important conceptual distinction: why are EC1 and EC2 treated differently from EC3, the pursuit of equality through consensus-based negotiation? The answer lies in their emotional and cognitive composition. EC1 and EC2 hinge on transforming powerful emotional dynamics—fear, self-protection, and indifference—into dispositions of courage and concern for others, making them foundational thresholds. EC3, by contrast, is more explicitly principle-based and deliberative: it requires not only reduced fear and increased empathy, but also a reflective commitment to egalitarian procedures as the legitimate way to regulate authority. In the fearful compliance group, these emotional thresholds are not fully crossed, so even when fragments of EC2 or EC3 appear in their narratives, they do not consolidate into stable opposition to hierarchical domination or into active support for collective voice.

As discussed in the Methodology chapter, ethical judgement draws on both emotion-based intuitions and reasoned principles (Haidt, 2012; Kahneman, 2011; Prinz, 2007; Nussbaum, 2001; Damasio, 1994). Some ethical orientations are closely tied to basic affective responses and require little conscious deliberation. Avoiding danger or fear is one such instinctive tendency; similarly, empathic concern for others' suffering often arises pre-reflectively. In this study, EC1 (overcoming fear of authority) and EC2 (moving beyond purely self-serving reasoning) are understood in relation to these emotional dynamics: EC1 requires working against a deeply rooted fear response, while EC2 builds on, or suppresses, spontaneous empathy and other-regarding concern.

By contrast, EC3—pursuing equality through consensus-oriented negotiation—is more explicitly a logic-based, principle-driven orientation. It involves endorsing egalitarian values and fair procedures as normatively correct ways to regulate power, even when such commitments are not directly supported by immediate emotional rewards. In the Chinese context, where independent collective organising is often perceived as politically sensitive, risky or legally constrained, espousing egalitarian negotiation as an abstract principle may lack both institutional protection and affective reinforcement. EC3 therefore depends heavily on reflective justification, and is comparatively fragile when set against powerful emotional pressures such as fear, loyalty, or the desire for security.

When individuals must choose between emotion-based and principle-based ethical codes, instinctive emotions tend to prevail—especially under hierarchical conditions where sanctions are credible. As Diefenbach (2013) argues, hierarchical systems actively manage these dynamics: they can reward conformity and self-interest, and penalise empathy, dissent or solidarity when these are perceived as threatening. In such contexts, fear can mute empathy, and organisational rewards can be used to rationalise compliance. Because principles are articulated through reasoning, they are

also more easily manipulated to legitimate existing arrangements; emotions can be regulated, but they are harder to fabricate.

For this study, the implication is twofold. First, EC3 on its own is not sufficient to identify reliable support for collective, union-like action. Participants who voice egalitarian or negotiation-based principles but have not overcome fear of authority (EC1) may articulate EC3 at the level of discourse, yet remain unable or unwilling to act on it. Their commitments are vulnerable to intimidation, incentives, and normative pressure, and thus cannot be read as stable foundations for collective resistance. Second, EC1 is treated as a necessary baseline for anti-hierarchical behaviour: without at least a partial overcoming of fear and self-abasement, even strong principled language is unlikely to translate into practice. For this reason, participants classified within the fearful compliance orientation—those who continue to be governed by fear despite occasional ethical disagreement—are not interpreted as “true fighters” against hierarchical domination, even when they occasionally invoke fairness or equality in their reasoning.

#### 4.3.3. Cautious individual fairness: self-interest ethics

Post-1980: No.6, No.8, No.23, No.34, No.62

Pre-1980: No.11, No.14, No.29, No.37, No.43, No.55

Different from the earlier tranche of data, all cases considered here display a relatively low power distance in practice: participants reported no difficulty meeting the boss alone to address a conflict. With the exception of No.43, No.55, and No.6, the great majority preferred a private, one-to-one approach and then keep matters to themselves; two explicitly said they would not share information with colleagues after the meeting. Only No.37 offered a clear rationale: “My trouble should be dealt with by myself,” signaling an individualized, self-regarding stance that deliberately avoids wider exposure. When presented with the follow-up scenarios in which the employer’s integrity and speaking attitude were varied, their intended course of action did not change, suggesting a stable self-protective calculus that accepts the hierarchical setting and does not extend toward either Conditional solidarity or Principled egalitarianism.

An anomalous case is No.23, who refused to answer the follow-up question, stating that “it is not right to judge his superior.” He also showed low trust in those around him (declining to talk to colleagues after the meeting) and low trust toward the interviewer. Taken together, these behaviours indicate an affirmative orientation to hierarchy and reinforce the pattern above.

Another special case is No.43. His account shows low power distance in practice—a low level of fear toward superiors—and a clear willingness to negotiate directly with management as a representative. As discussed earlier, this stance is consensus-oriented and aligns with a social-contract view of workplace order, consistent with the orientations you term Conditional solidarity (procedural negotiation among recognised equals). His situation resembles that of No.32 and No.15 reported in the earlier set of cases; however, unlike those earlier accounts, the present group appear to have overcome fear and self-abasement when approaching superiors. At the same time, No.43 does not display explicit concern for colleagues’ broader interests, which makes sustained collective action less likely. Even so, his readiness to face authority and to pursue consensus-based negotiation positions him as an individual challenger to hierarchical dominance, rather than a purely compliant actor.

No.55 resembles No.43 in showing low power distance and a readiness to confront issues directly, but with a distinct pattern in the follow-ups: varying the superior’s integrity did not change his intended course of action (he continued to favour a compromise/tolerance path), suggesting that integrity cues did not enter his calculus in any decisive way. By contrast, when confronted with a hostile or domineering speaking style, he consistently preferred good-faith negotiation with management,

which signals an egalitarian expectation about how disagreements should be handled. Read together, these choices imply a limited concern for others' situations (given the indifference to integrity cues associated with reciprocity), coupled with a principled preference for procedural fairness; he thus appears as an individual challenger of hierarchical dominance rather than a solidaristic organizer.

No.6 exhibits a similar overall stance but with a different trigger: his responsiveness to integrity is activated under hostile tone. When a superior both lacks integrity and speaks contemptuously, he moves beyond private resolution and is willing to organise a strike, treating the integrity breach as a moral warrant for retaliatory escalation. In brief, No.43, No.55 and No.6 all function as individual fighters against hierarchy, but they do so through different thresholds: No.43 by stepping forward as a representative negotiator; No.55 by insisting on honest negotiation even under dominance while remaining unmoved by integrity cues; and No.6 by escalating when integrity is absent and disrespect is present.

A small subset across both cohorts narrated strong obedience to superiors. In the younger group, this included No.23 and No.34; in the older group, No.11, No.14, and No.37. In each case, the intended course of action was unconditional compliance with the superior's decision regardless of integrity or speaking attitude. Although No.23 declined to answer the follow-up scenario directly, his statement that "it is not right to judge a superior" clearly signals the same stance. Given the very small numbers, no persuasive generational comparison is warranted; descriptively, such obedience-first narratives appeared more often among older participants, but the difference is not large enough to alter the chapter's overall interpretation.

#### 4.3.4. Conditional solidarity

Post-1980: No.5, No.46, No.49, No.54, No.56, No.57, No.58

Pre-1980: No.25, No.31, No.42, No.48, No.59

All the samples belong to conditional solidarity group show more concern for others' integrity (They change their answer in integrity issue). This is the reason that they belong to this group, as interpersonal-concordance orientation is reflected through their decision-making process, which could be regarded as a crucial element for close relationships and social acceptance in human society. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the cutoff rule between this group and previous groups is whether people care about others' interests, showing a social mind toward others (Kohlberg, 1973). In other words, it is the question of whether people show empathy towards others. Based on the description by Diefenbach (2013) of Kohlberg's theory (1973), the level of empathy can be regarded as a crucial element in identifying which high moral stage people belong to. For people with a higher moral stage compared to those within Conditional solidarity group they may not prefer negotiation, as people in the group of Principled egalitarianism indicate social-contract orientation, but they at least show empathy toward others. In the second question of this research, people with a high level of empathy are more likely to alter their answer when facing integrity issues with the understanding that 'people with integrity should not deserve tragedy.' For example, we may find it acceptable if a guilty man is punished but show empathy for an innocent person getting hurt. This phenomenon can be explained by social exchange theory. According to the argument from Blau (1964), social exchange should be defined as distinguished from any economic exchange, where the contract is based on long-term unspecific exchanges of tangible and intangible resources. It will be done voluntarily with the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). Led by the natural tendency of social exchange, people expect to focus on reciprocal behaviour from others, where the virtue of integrity can be regarded as the internal force for reciprocity. Identifying others' potential reciprocal behaviours, realizing others' existence, and understanding others' feelings will be necessary, and this is the ability fuelled by empathy. Because of this, people with a high level of empathy will show different attitudes or behaviours towards others who have or don't have the virtue of integrity. For collective action, the real concern for others is the basis to organize a union activity. It is the internal force to maintain solid

solidarity in any kind of collective activities.

Although the people from this group can be regarded as supporters of collective unionized activities that fulfil both the first and second ethical considerations, they have not yet achieved the third ethical consideration fuelled by egalitarian value. Different from the first two considerations based on emotional instinct, the third one stems from a logical question of why egalitarian value is better than hierarchical value. To achieve the logic that legitimizes egalitarian principles, it may require certain experiences or education to trigger the logic. Luckily, it is not the only approach to achieving that. Many scholars, such as Kohlberg and Gilligan, indicate the causation between empathy and egalitarian value. Empathy, which involves understanding and sharing the feelings of others, can contribute to the development of egalitarian values. When individuals empathize with others who are experiencing inequality or injustice, it can lead to a greater sense of fairness and a desire for a more egalitarian society (Kohlberg, 1973; Gilligan, 1982). Although it's not always a straightforward causal relationship from empathy to egalitarian value, according to the argument on social structure from Diefenbach (2013) and Giddens (1984), we cannot deny that the persistent social behaviours that inspire the instinct of empathy will promote the appearance of egalitarian logic. In this sense, there is a large possibility that people who persistently hold the second ethical consideration emphasizing empathy for others will cultivate egalitarian logic. Within a hierarchical region such as China, the courage to overcome fear from superiors while working through a hierarchical system is essential to realize the logic. Therefore, the first two ethical considerations can be the basis for the third one. Due to its causal relationship between the second and third ethical considerations, I can conclude that people in the group of Conditional solidarity can be the pre-stage of Principled egalitarianism group.

Comparing cohorts, younger participants more frequently expressed willingness to move beyond purely private handling toward representative negotiation, while this was less common among older participants. At the same time, both cohorts included cases that displayed low trust in collective action: in the younger group No.58 and No.46, and in the older group No.25 and No.48, all kept their responses within the bounds of private, one-to-one discussion or endurance/compromise when integrity and speaking attitude were varied, indicating reluctance to escalate beyond the dyad. Taken together, the younger group's greater openness to representative negotiation suggests a modest shift in moral vocabulary that could, in the long run, be compatible with the development of independent unions in the Chinese context. However, older participants' scepticism may reflect a deeper practical reading of local risks and constraints, which tempers expectations about collective action. Given that this is not a longitudinal study, the analysis cannot trace how such orientations within the current younger cohort may evolve over time.

#### 4.3.5. Principled egalitarianism

Post-1980: No.1, No.21, No.40, No.41, No.50, No.52

Pre-1980: No.35, No.39, No.45, No.47, No.61, No.63

In this group across both cohorts, two patterns emerge from the follow-up scenarios that varied the superior's integrity and speaking attitude. The first pattern comprises participants who consistently prefer representative negotiation with management—regardless of the interpersonal cues presented. Their stance signals strong trust in collective bargaining and a stable, consensus-oriented view of how conflicts should be handled among recognized equals. The second pattern includes participants whose preferences shift with interpersonal cues: they are responsive to integrity and tone, adjusting their course between private handling, representative negotiation, or restraint as those cues change. This cue-sensitive group demonstrates the full set of ethical considerations discussed earlier (concern for others, willingness to abandon purely self-serving calculations, and an egalitarian mindset), yet—unlike the first pattern—they do not exhibit full trust in collective bargaining across all situations; their support is conditional rather than categorical. This interpretation follows the intent of the scenario design, where outcomes are held constant and only interpersonal elements vary to

reveal participants' underlying ethical orientations.

For the first pattern, most participants signaled a willingness to serve as representatives and showed no fear of meeting a superior one-to-one—rejecting obedience/silence as a default. In the initial scenario, they opted to speak on behalf of peers rather than keep the matter purely private. An exception is No.40, who initially preferred a private, one-to-one approach and was not comfortable acting as a representative, but was willing to communicate with colleagues after the meeting. However, like his peers, when presented with the follow-up scenarios that varied the superior's integrity and speaking attitude, he consistently favoured representative negotiation with co-workers united, irrespective of those interpersonal cues. Taken together, these choices display a consensus-oriented stance grounded in a social-contract view of workplace order and fulfil the study's other-regarding and egalitarian-procedural ethical considerations.

For the remaining participants within this orientation, the three ethical considerations were also evident, yet their responses did not explicitly converge on “honest negotiation.” Collective bargaining—and honest negotiation as its concrete form—is a rule-guided, conceptually demanding repertoire. It is unrealistic to expect every respondent to name or endorse it outright, particularly in the Chinese context where such activities are often problematised or treated as unlawful. What anchors their placement here is their recognition of egalitarian value: they affirm that disputes ought to be handled with fair procedures among recognised equals, even if they do not always articulate collective bargaining as the preferred route. Honest negotiation is one strategy for realising an egalitarian order, not the only one.

How, then, do those who persistently endorse honest negotiation differ from those who hold egalitarian value without naming that strategy? The contrast lies in the breadth of empathy. The former extend concern beyond the self and immediate relations to a wider circle of co-workers, detecting reciprocity cues at a more collective level and therefore seeing joint, representative bargaining as the appropriate vehicle for justice; the latter keep concern closer to the dyad, endorsing equality in principle while preferring lower-exposure repertoires unless stronger reciprocity signals emerge.

I use recognition of integrity as a practical indicator of whether participants display empathy for others. This approach has limits. It draws on Kohlberg's account of moral reasoning and works well for identifying people with an interpersonal-concord orientation—those who value harmony and peace in everyday life. Such individuals readily empathise with, and unite around, others who share similar principles, but they tend to withhold empathy from those who do not. For collective action, this ethic is valuable—these participants are crucial for building solidarity—yet it may struggle to bridge difference.

Participants who consistently endorse honest, consensus-oriented negotiation (i.e., representative bargaining among recognised equals) can overcome this limit. Their values lead them to respect differences and extend empathy beyond like-minded peers, thereby mobilising a wider base of support than those who focus only on interpersonal concord. In Kohlberg's terms, this corresponds to a social-contract orientation. In our data, those who reliably favoured representative negotiation are positioned to exert greater influence on collective action than those who affirm egalitarian values in principle but prefer lower-exposure repertoires. They are not only dissatisfied with hierarchical arrangements; they are also willing to address them through honest negotiation, and, when opportunities arise, to contribute to collective efforts.

Although both generational groups have the same number of people in this stage, the young generation group has one more person who persists in honest negotiation, representing their consensus principles, which can potentially unite more people to participate in union activities in society. So, it could still be regarded as a small development through generations.

#### 4.4 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has examined how workers in two generations narrate their relationships to authority, fairness and potential collective voice, using three ethical considerations as sensitising concepts: EC1 (overcoming fear of authority), EC2 (moving beyond purely self-serving reasoning), and EC3 (pursuing equality through consensus-oriented negotiation). Read through these lenses, participants' accounts clustered into five recurring orientations: Obedience and Silence, Fearful Compliance, Cautious Individual Fairness, Conditional Solidarity, and Principled Egalitarianism. These orientations are not rigid types, but patterned ways of justifying deference, expressing grievance, or imagining resistance.

Across this continuum, a generational contrast emerges as a difference in emphasis rather than a sharp break. Older participants more frequently normalised hierarchy, framed silence or endurance as prudent, and expressed limited confidence that challenging authority would be either safe or meaningful. Many younger participants, while still constrained by fear and institutional risk, more often articulated concerns for fairness beyond the self, criticised arbitrary power, and considered the possibility of speaking with or for others. A small number in both cohorts displayed more principled, egalitarian reasoning that resonates with a social-contract view of legitimate authority.

However, the chapter also shows that ethical recognition does not automatically translate into robust oppositional capacity. Participants situated in Fearful Compliance and Cautious Individual Fairness often recognised injustice, sometimes empathised with others, yet remained inhibited by fear, self-protection, or contextual constraints. Conditional Solidarity marked an important step toward shared responsibility and selective cooperation, but solidarity remained bounded by reciprocity and "deservingness". Only those approaching Principled Egalitarianism combined reduced fear, concern for others, and a stable commitment to equality-based procedures in a way that could form a more durable normative foundation for collective voice.

Taken together, these findings suggest that unquestioned obedience is weakening and that ethical vocabularies supportive of fairness, reciprocity and equality are present—particularly among younger workers—but they are fragile, selective and unevenly grounded. The next chapter builds on this ethical map by examining how these orientations shape workers' evaluations of specific forms of action in conflict situations, and where the translation from moral judgement to practical choice is enabled, constrained, or blocked.

## Chapter 5: Finding on online protest

### 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I examine how participants with different ethical orientations evaluate concrete forms of collective action as ways of responding to workplace injustice. Building on the previous chapter, which identified five orientations toward authority and fairness—Obedience and Silence, Fearful Compliance, Cautious Individual Fairness, Conditional Solidarity, and Principled Egalitarianism—this analysis focuses on those whose narratives indicate a stronger ethical basis for collective voice.

The discussion centres on the four forms of action introduced in the interview scenarios: strike, third-party invited negotiation (for example, involving unions or government departments), online protest, and fighting back alone. These options were presented as hypothetical but recognisable repertoires through which workers might voice grievances or seek redress. Here, they are treated not as neutral “choices” on a scale, but as windows into how participants link their moral commitments to imagined forms of practice.

Accordingly, the chapter primarily draws on participants whose accounts demonstrate at least the first two ethical considerations—overcoming fear of authority (EC1) and moving beyond purely self-serving reasoning (EC2)—and, in some cases, also embody the third (EC3), a commitment to equality and consensus-oriented negotiation. These participants, located mainly within the orientations labelled Conditional Solidarity and Principled Egalitarianism, provide the clearest indication of how collective-voice values shape preferences for strike action, third-party negotiation, online protest, or individual resistance. Participants in the more deferential orientations may occasionally endorse such actions, but their engagement is more situational or instrumental; they are therefore used as a comparative backdrop rather than the core focus of this chapter.

### 5.2 Data analysis on the preference of resistance activities

For this part of the analysis, I focus on participants whose narratives indicate a stronger ethical basis for collective voice, namely those classified under Conditional Solidarity and Principled Egalitarianism. These participants have, to varying degrees, overcome fear of authority (EC1), moved beyond purely self-interested reasoning (EC2), and in some cases endorsed equality-based, consensus-oriented negotiation (EC3). The aim here is not to quantify preferences, but to understand how this subgroup imagines acting when conflict arises.

Among the post-1980 participants in these orientations (e.g. No.1, No.5, No.21, No.40, No.41, No.46, No.49, No.50, No.52, No.54, No.56, No.57, No.58), the most common pattern was to place third-party invited negotiation—involving unions, government departments, or other recognised bodies—above strike, online protest or fighting back alone. They described third-party mediation as a way to “solve problems properly”, “follow procedure”, or “let both sides talk”, signalling a preference for solutions that combine fairness with institutional legitimacy. Only a very small number of younger participants expressed a stronger attraction to strike as an initial option, and even in those cases strike was framed as a response to deep distrust in employers’ willingness to negotiate, rather than as an automatic tactic.

Among the pre-1980 participants in Conditional Solidarity and Principled Egalitarianism (e.g. No.25, No.31, No.35, No.39, No.42, No.45, No.47, No.48, No.59, No.61, No.63), the pattern was even clearer: third-party negotiation was consistently treated as the most appropriate route, while no one in this subgroup placed strike as their first choice. For older workers with stronger ethical commitments to fairness and collective responsibility, collective action was more readily imagined through authorised channels than through open confrontation. This does not mean that strike was rejected in principle, but that it was seen as a high-risk, last-resort option in the Chinese context.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that, among those most ethically supportive of collective voice, third-party invited negotiation is the dominant imagined pathway for addressing injustice, while strike, online protest and individual retaliation occupy more conditional and contested positions. Young participants include a small number who lean more readily toward disruptive tactics, but the overall picture remains one in which collective voice is most thinkable when it can be framed as procedurally legitimate and oriented toward negotiated agreement.

The strong preference for third-party invited negotiation among this subgroup can be read, in part, against a wider normative emphasis on harmony and relationship maintenance in the Chinese context (Xu, 1998; Zhang & Harwood, 2002). This does not mean that “culture” mechanically determines behaviour, but that many participants framed legitimate conflict resolution as seeking agreement through recognised procedures rather than open confrontation. This tendency will be developed further in the discussion chapter.

Within this ethical frame, third-party negotiation reflects a social-consensus orientation: employers are not cast as inherent enemies, but as actors who should be engaged as counterparties in a process aimed at a mutually acceptable, fair outcome. By contrast, prioritising strike as an initial response implies a more adversarial stance, treating the employer as a potential opponent and accepting open confrontation as necessary. This choice is closely linked to an organising logic and sits more uneasily with the consensus-oriented preference for negotiated solutions. This does not mean that consensus-oriented actors would never endorse strike; rather, they are less likely to treat it as their first resort, especially under conditions of uncertainty and risk.

No.40 illustrates this tension. As discussed earlier, No.40's broader reasoning aligns with a consensus-oriented outlook, valuing negotiation and fairness. Yet in the scenario responses, No.40 expressed a stronger inclination toward strike than toward third-party negotiation. This pattern suggests low trust in employer groups and limited confidence in institutional channels, and it signals a greater willingness to confront hierarchical authority directly. In this sense, No.40's stance embodies both the ethical vocabulary of consensus and a readiness to move beyond it when legitimacy is doubted, offering a subtle challenge to the existing hierarchical order.

Comparing the two generational cohorts, none of the older participants in the Conditional Solidarity or Principled Egalitarianism groups placed strike as their first choice. This pattern can be cautiously interpreted in light of their longer exposure to the Chinese institutional context, where spontaneous work stoppages are widely perceived as politically sensitive, tightly controlled and high risk, and where direct confrontation with superiors or employing organisations is often seen as dangerous or futile. Their reluctance is therefore likely shaped both by contextual knowledge and by a preference to avoid open conflict with the hierarchical system.

By contrast, a small number of younger participants expressed a greater willingness to consider strike as a primary or early option in response to employment conflict. One possible—though necessarily tentative—interpretation draws on life-course and generational perspectives (Erikson, 1997; Martinson & Ma, 2009), which suggest that political and moral outlooks may shift with age and experience. Younger respondents may feel less bound by established constraints and more willing to contemplate disruptive tactics. However, given the cross-sectional design of this study, such an explanation cannot be verified here. Any claim that younger supporters of collective action will necessarily become more cautious or conservative over time would require longitudinal evidence.

Within the limits of this dataset, and aside from the ambiguous case of No.40, there is little evidence of deep inconsistency between participants' ethical orientations and their preferred strategies. Those who endorse collective-voice values in principled terms generally favour responses that they see as fair, procedurally legitimate and, where possible, collectively grounded. Younger participants in this subgroup are somewhat more willing than their older counterparts to treat strike as a thinkable option, but this remains a minority stance and is typically framed as conditional and risk-aware rather than impulsively radical.

The next section turns to participants' views on online protest to explore whether this newer repertoire of action (Castells, 2012) is considered an acceptable and legitimate means of collective voice by those who already express ethical support for union-like activities and collective representation.

### 5.3 Opinions on Online Protests

Participants expressed two broad orientations toward online protest as a form of collective action: a small group of conditional supporters, and a larger group of sceptical or rejecting respondents. Only a few interviewees (for example, No.21, No.39, No.45, No.47, No.49 and No.58) described circumstances under which they would regard online protest as a legitimate or useful way to voice grievances. Most others distanced themselves from this repertoire, questioning its appropriateness, safety or effectiveness.

The following subsections first examine the reasoning of those who were open to online protest, and then turn to those who resisted or rejected it, in order to clarify how ethical commitments to fairness and collective voice are translated—or not—into support for this newer mode of action.

#### 5.3.1 Group Supporting Online Protests

Only a small number of participants expressed support for online protest under certain conditions. Among them, three were from the post-1980 group (No.21, No.49, No.58) and three from the pre-1980 group (No.39, No.45, No.47). Given this limited spread across both cohorts, it is not meaningful to claim a strong generational difference; rather, support for online protest appears as a minority position shared across ages.

Their comments highlight the circumstances in which online protest is seen as acceptable or even necessary—for example, when formal channels fail, when the issue is serious and factually clear, or when collective visibility is required to counter power imbalances. The following analysis draws on their narratives to illustrate this conditional endorsement of online protest.

No.21: "I think it is understandable. Some online protests are good, but sometimes they can be misused. Overall, I would support it."

No.39: "I think it is a correct way to seek justice. The power of one individual is weak, but if we unite, we can be strong. So I support it."

No.45: "If I have a good boss, I would not choose this way. But if the boss is bad, I would do it and support it—as long as it does not go as far as physically attacking the boss."

No.47: "I think many people are already doing this. If it is a real issue and about justice, I support it."

No.49: "I think it is fine. I support it."

No.58: "I do not think it works if only one person posts. That is useless. But if many people act together, then I would support online protest."

Even among these supporters, online protest was framed as a highly conditional and risky option. Several participants, such as No.21, stressed the danger of malicious use—cases where fabricated or exaggerated stories damage reputations—highlighting the need for online protest to be grounded in truth and justice. No.58 questioned its effectiveness when undertaken by isolated individuals, suggesting that it only becomes meaningful when coordinated and collectively organised. Taken together, their accounts show that support for online protest is tied to strict moral and practical conditions: it should be fact-based, proportionate, and collectively enacted, otherwise it risks ethical deterioration or strategic futility.

The next section turns to those participants who rejected or distanced themselves from online protest, to examine how concerns about morality, legality and feasibility underpin their opposition.

### 5.3.2 Not supporting online protest group.

Their comments on the online protest are shown below:

No.1: Did not express a clear opinion on online protest.

No.5: “I don’t think it is necessary to fight through social media. If your boss is not satisfied, one reason may be your work performance, or there may be other reasons. It is not necessary to put everything on the internet. It is not moral.”

No.25: “I would not choose to fight back in that way. I would just leave the company; that would be my way of resisting. If I fight back publicly, my cost will be higher than what I gain. What we do should be reasonable; there is right and wrong. I would not support using the internet for this.”

No.31: “Because I do not have much education, I do not think the internet would help me.”

No.35: “I think these issues should be dealt with in real life, through face-to-face talk.”

No.40: “For me it is not very good. I prefer negotiation. I do not know how to use the internet, so I do not think online protest is a good way.”

No.41: “I do not support online protest. If our interests are harmed, we can contact the union and use legal methods. Creating public pressure on the internet will not solve the problem.”

No.42: “I do not think striking is good; negotiation is better. Online protest is also not good, and I would not choose to fight alone. Negotiation is the best option; strike is the worst; online protest is better than acting alone.”

No.46: “Negotiation through proper channels is the best way. Acting alone is the worst. Online protest is not very good, because in some ways it is not legal. If we use the internet, it should be through an authorised department. I think striking is bad, but still better than acting alone. I do not support online protest. I just want to work peacefully and live my own life.”

No.48: “I would not support online protest. We should ask the authorities to handle the problem. We are all like a family; we should not do it that way.”

No.50: “I do not really support it. I think conflicts can be handled in private. Online protest is quite an ‘evil’ choice.”

No.52: “I do not really support online protest. Putting things on the internet will not solve the problem. We should do something real, like negotiation or using legal tools to protect ourselves.”

No.54: “I would not support it. I think we should not pay too much attention to this kind of issue.”

No.56: “It is not moral. Using online protest may have bad consequences.”

No.57: “I would not support it. It is too radical.”

No.59: “I think it is not very good. Why should we put it on the internet?”

No.61: “I don’t think it is good. We should communicate with the boss first; only if there is no other way might putting it online be considered.”

No.63: “I do not really support it, because it may have too much influence and create too many problems.”

With the exception of No.1 and No.42, who did not elaborate on their choices, all other participants who opposed online protest offered clear explanations. Their reasons cluster into four overlapping themes.

First, several participants argued that employment disputes should be handled offline and face to face, not on social media (e.g. No.35, No.40, No.41, No.52, No.61). For them, responsible conflict resolution meant direct communication, negotiation, or formal procedures, rather than public exposure.

Second, a number of respondents raised moral objections to online protest (e.g. No.5, No.50, No.54, No.56, No.57, No.59, No.63). They described it as “not moral”, “evil”, “too radical”, or as a form of behaviour that could unjustifiably harm others’ reputations or create disproportionate consequences.

Third, some participants expressed a strong preference for authorised channels and legal procedures, and associated online protest with illegality or improper conduct (e.g. No.46, No.48). They emphasised that problems should be referred to relevant authorities and that any use of media should occur through recognised institutional routes.

Finally, a smaller group questioned the effectiveness and cost of online protest (e.g. No.25, No.31). They doubted whether going online would achieve concrete results and feared that it might generate more trouble than benefit, especially for individual workers with limited resources or digital skills.

Together, these accounts show that rejection of online protest is grounded not in simple apathy, but in concerns about appropriate forum, morality, legality, and practical risk.

Among those who opposed online protest, the four themes outlined above often overlapped in practice. Several participants, such as No.35, emphasised that employment conflicts should be resolved through face-to-face communication and negotiation, rather than being exposed online. No.40 similarly expressed a preference for negotiation and noted that he did not know how to use the internet for such purposes, signalling both a practical barrier and a sense that online protest does not belong to his repertoire of legitimate action. No.41, No.52 and No.61 highlighted the importance of “real” actions—negotiation, legal procedures, or union support—that they believed could produce tangible outcomes. Taken together, these responses reflect a preference for direct, institutional or interpersonal channels, and a relatively low level of trust in online activity as an effective or appropriate tool.

For some participants, this preference was closely connected to trust in formal authority and legal procedures. No.41 explicitly argued that problems should be addressed through unions and “legal methods” rather than through public pressure online. No.46 and No.48 also referred to “authority departments” and stressed that disputes ought to be handled through recognised procedures. No.48 suggested that online protests were, to some extent, improper or bordering on illegitimate, reinforcing his rejection of such practices. Read through the lens of Kohlberg’s “law-and-order” orientation, these narratives resonate with an ethic that values respect for rules, institutions and social harmony as moral goods in themselves (Kohlberg, 1973). No.48’s description of the employment relationship as “like a family” further underlines a harmony-oriented view. However, in the Chinese context—where independent or confrontational collective action is often perceived as politically sensitive—this attachment to legality, order and harmony can also discourage oppositional uses of collective voice, even when participants recognise unfairness. The tension between perceiving an act as “illegal” but “justified” is taken up more fully in the discussion chapter.

A different strand of reasoning centred on doubts about effectiveness and personal cost. No.25 indicated that leaving the company would be preferable to public confrontation because open resistance would cost more than it could deliver. No.31 felt that, given her limited education, using the internet would not help her protect her rights. These views converge with those who favour offline, institutional routes: online protest is seen as either ineffective, beyond their practical reach, or likely to generate more trouble than benefit.

The most frequently cited concern, however, was moral. Participants such as No.5, No.50, No.54, No.56, No.57, No.59 and No.63 portrayed online protest as morally problematic, even when they used different language to do so. No.50 and No.56 argued that using the internet to expose employment disputes and damage an employer’s reputation was “evil” or “not moral”, insisting that such matters should be resolved privately within the organisation. No.63 similarly worried that wide circulation of conflict-related information could have a harmful impact on the organisation as a whole. No.54, No.57 and No.59 did not always use the word “immoral”, but their descriptions of online protest as “too radical” or “not good” pointed in the same direction: resistance that publicly shames or destabilises is seen as crossing a moral boundary. These reactions suggest that many participants hold a normative restraint against broadcasting conflict online, which in turn can limit the circulation of dissent and constrain anti-hierarchical mobilisation.

Taken together, these findings indicate that support for online protest is rare and highly conditional among participants who otherwise express concerns about fairness or endorse collective voice in principle. Opposition to online protest is grounded not simply in passivity, but in a combination of: (1) preference for face-to-face and institutional solutions; (2) trust in legal-authoritative channels and concern for social order; (3) doubts about effectiveness under conditions of surveillance and control; and (4) moral unease about public shaming and reputation harm. The broader implications of these patterns—including the role of internet regulation and harmony-oriented moral codes in shaping

perceptions of “legitimate” resistance—are explored in the next chapter.

#### 5.4 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has examined how workers who display stronger ethical support for collective voice imagine acting in situations of workplace injustice. Focusing on participants associated with Conditional Solidarity and Principled Egalitarianism, it explored how commitments to overcoming fear (EC1), moving beyond purely self-interested reasoning (EC2), and, in some cases, endorsing equality-based negotiation (EC3), are translated into preferences for strike, third-party invited negotiation, online protest, and individual resistance.

Across both generations, the analysis shows a clear normative and strategic priority: among those most supportive of collective-voice values, third-party invited negotiation emerges as the dominant and most “thinkable” form of collective action. It is framed as fair, procedurally legitimate, and consistent with a social-consensus orientation that seeks resolution through recognised channels rather than direct confrontation. Strike action, by contrast, is understood as a high-risk, last-resort option. Only a small minority of younger participants treat strike as a plausible early choice, and even they present it as conditional on severe injustice and the perceived failure of negotiation. This suggests that, even within the most ethically committed subgroup, willingness to confront employers openly remains fragile and context-dependent.

The findings on online protest further underscore this ambivalence. While a few participants across both cohorts are willing to support online protest under strict conditions—factual accuracy, collective participation, and clear injustice—the majority reject or distance themselves from it. Their reasons are rooted in concerns about appropriate forums (problems should be handled face-to-face or via institutions), moral boundaries (avoiding disproportionate harm or “evil” shaming), trust in legal-authoritative channels, doubts about effectiveness, and sensitivity to risk in a tightly regulated digital environment. In this way, online protest appears as a morally and politically constrained repertoire, even for those who express strong commitments to fairness and collective responsibility.

Taken together, this chapter demonstrates that ethical endorsement of collective voice does not straightforwardly produce support for disruptive or publicly visible forms of action. Instead, collective-voice orientations are channelled into strategies that remain compatible with perceived legality, procedural order, and social harmony. A small number of participants—such as those willing to contemplate strike or conditional online protest—hint at more confrontational possibilities, but their positions are exceptional rather than typical. The next chapter builds on these findings by situating these preferences within the broader political, cultural and regulatory context, and by analysing how law, harmony-oriented moral codes and perceptions of legitimacy shape the boundary between “acceptable” and “unacceptable” forms of resistance.

### [Chapter 6: Discussion](#)

#### 5.1 Chapter Introduction:

This chapter focuses on the question of the disagreement surrounding online protests, followed by the moral concerns articulated in the findings chapter. Leading into a profound discussion, it indicates how the third ethical consideration --- Pursuing Equality through Consensus Negotiation can be

conceived in society and expresses prospects for future related research.

The chapter starts with the situation of social media in the context of China as an authoritarian regime. Although much research has indicated the potential power of social media to challenge authoritarian governments, the governments themselves will not sit back and wait for demise. In this sense, there are plenty of strategies to limit the power of social media that may challenge the legitimacy of the regime. In the Chinese context, a significant portion of content censorship occurs retrospectively, represented by the Golden Shield (GS) project. Normally, especially from western scholars in the field of social media research, strong censorship of social media should not be welcomed by citizens due to issues of personal data protection and potential risks to information security. However, according to research in the Chinese context, most Chinese people are quite welcoming of all kinds of surveillance from the government. So, why is that? According to research by Su, Xu, and Cao (2021), it is because of their high concern for social stability and their willingness to sacrifice a degree of their liberty in exchange for a sense of safety. The information blockage and lack of experience in spontaneous politically related social activities make it hard for Chinese people to disconnect social stability from the current authoritarian regime. They believe that the position of the current political authority is significant and necessary to maintain social stability. This phenomenon is related to an epistemological debate between rationalism and empiricism.

The fundamental disagreement between rationalism and empiricism is how they understand how people perceive knowledge. Rationalists believe that knowledge derived from reason is certain and universal, while empiricists argue that knowledge grounded in sensory experience is contingent and subject to revision. Leading from this, they develop opposite opinions on the relationship between individuals and social structure. On the one hand, as knowledge comes from internal reasoning and logic based on rationalism, the freedom of each individual in society is not necessarily guaranteed. But for empiricists, it is the foundation of various experiences as the source of knowledge. On the other hand, the strong emphasis from rationalists on internal reasoning and logic will promote a hierarchical social structure based on individuals' reasoning capacity, providing room for dictators to decorate themselves as 'philosopher-kings'. But for empiricism, as experiences cannot easily be ranked, different people with different experiences can potentially provide different angles to the questions, which leads to a more multilateral problem-solving process following a more democratic social system. Therefore, the debate in the epistemological field implies the reason for Chinese people's attitude toward government supervision.

The preference for epistemological choice conceives different cultural tendencies: one is collectivism represented by China, the other is individualism represented by Western nations. Collectivism emphasizes obedience and self-sacrifice to the group, legitimizing the social position between superiors and subordinates. Individualism, on the contrary, emphasizes experiencing a sense of self-worth and personal achievement, implying the pursuit of freedom, which naturally rejects a hierarchical system that highlights the importance of order and control. Therefore, a more empirical epistemology and a more individualist culture will be the way to resolve the moral dilemma of Chinese people and achieve the third ethical consideration, thus correspondingly reinforcing the power of spontaneous social activities in China. This phenomenon can also explain why the participants in this research have moral concerns about online protests.

## 5.2 Chinese online surveillance

Many scholars have concluded that social media has the potential to undermine an authoritarian government (Tufekci, 2017; Morozov, 2011; Gladwell, 2010; Shirky, 2008). Authoritarian regimes around the world, fully cognizant of the political threats posed by social media, have taken extensive measures, both offline and online. These measures include tactics like online censorship (King, Pan, and Roberts, 2013), keyword filtering (Zittrain and Palfrey, 2008), distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks (Deibert, 2015), astroturfing (King, Pan, and Roberts, 2017), surveillance (Deibert, 2019), and even physical intimidation (Morozov, 2011). The reason that authoritarian regimes recognize social

media as a threat has been implied from previous chapters. To legitimize the superior position within an authoritarian society, any information that questions their capabilities as rulers and their selfless personalities should be disguised, which challenges their ethical rationality. In the Chinese context, where the government tightly regulates the Internet (Kennedy, 2009), a significant portion of content censorship occurs retrospectively. This means that censorship actions are taken after content has already circulated on the Internet for some time. Within China's online environment, you can often find strongly critical and satirical remarks about political institutions, policies, and occasionally sensitive topics. These expressions are generally allowed and widely observed, as long as they do not involve high-ranking national leaders (Tang and Huhe, 2020). The Chinese authorities initiated the development of its surveillance capabilities as early as 1998 when the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) launched the Golden Shield (GS) project. This project aimed to create a comprehensive information platform to support police operations (Su, Xu, and Cao, 2021).

By 2006, the Chinese police had successfully established a nationwide intranet infrastructure that interconnected various levels of public security bureaus, ranging from the central MPS to approximately 3,000 county-level bureaus. The GS platform integrates multiple components, including a comprehensive population database, a security management information system, a criminal information system, an immigration administration information system, a detention, prison, and re-education information system, and a traffic management information system. Additionally, the local GS systems incorporate a database for monitoring and controlling high-priority individuals.

Not only for these, the Chinese government, in collaboration with major technology companies like Tencent and Alibaba, is currently exploring the implementation of social credit systems. These systems aim to reward or penalize individuals, companies, and organizations based on their perceived "trustworthiness," which is assessed through personal, financial, and behavioural data. As of 2018, 43 local governments in China had initiated pilot programs for social credit systems. While there is currently no centralized national social credit system in place, the government is actively working towards establishing one soon.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese citizens have been monitored and categorized into color-coded groups, namely red, yellow, or green, based on their health status and the associated COVID-19 risk level. Additionally, the Chinese government has announced that violations of quarantine regulations will result in a reduction of individuals' social credit scores. The potential introduction of a nationwide social credit system powered by artificial intelligence (AI) could have significant and far-reaching consequences.

Scholarly research concerning China's state surveillance is experiencing a notable expansion due to these facts (Su, Xu, and Cao, 2021). Some academics contend that the government permits the dissemination of highly sensitive content on social media platforms, utilizing this information to assess public sentiment, anticipate potential protests, and monitor instances of local corruption (Qin, Stromberg, and Wu, 2017). According to the discussions encompassing the policy context of China's surveillance state and its associated risks (Xiao, 2019), it has been observed that the social credit system in China has effectively influenced the behaviour of its citizens (Kostka and Antoine, 2019). Due to these facts in the Chinese context, the distrust of social media from the participants of this research can be explained. However, we cannot ignore the potential advantage provided by social media to collective action and voice.

The most obvious advantage of social media is its ability to lower the cost of collective voice and actions (Shirky, 2011). Social media platforms enable users to easily create and share unique textual and visual content within their social circles, facilitating rapid information dissemination. This undermines a government's capacity to exert control over content shared on social media—a phenomenon of considerable interest to scholars who examine collective resistance within authoritarian systems. When individuals are uncertain about others' willingness to join a cause, they often hesitate to participate (Chwe, 2013). Social media platforms substantially reduce the cost

associated with transmitting information, including details about protest participation and the government's level of unpopularity. This flood of information helps surmount what Timur Kuran refers to as the 'revolution threshold' (Kuran, 1997), which dissuades individual citizens from engaging in anti-regime protests (Lohmann, 1994). The Arab Spring, a series of mass uprisings in the Middle East, provides a pertinent example. Social media played a pivotal role in mobilizing both the initial activists and individuals on the periphery who participated in these uprisings (Zeng and Wong, 2022). For the advantages provided by social media, Zang and Wong (2022) produce a more comprehensive argument: Firstly, it's important to note that not all the information shared on social media poses a threat to a regime. Authoritarian governments don't necessarily need to suppress the circulation of non-political information. Secondly, while online tools like keyword filtering can enable the state to pre-screen specific media content, it is technically unfeasible to proactively eliminate all undesirable information. For instance, in China, censorship often occurs in response to events that have already gained significant public attention (King, Pan, and Roberts, 2017). Lastly, social media platforms are inherently interactive and offer personalized features. This enables users to customize the information they consume (Pariser, 2011), essentially curating their own content preferences. These advantages provide support to potential participants of collective actions on the one hand to gain information they need, on the other hand, seeking support through society in a low profile. However, according to the research from Su, Xu, and Cao (2021), there is another barrier that prevents Chinese people from utilizing these advantages.

Due to the nature of surveillance, the invasion of individuals' privacy is not avoidable. Researchers have discovered that Europeans have exhibited significant levels of apprehension regarding the protection of their personal data and the potential risks to information security (Potoglou et al., 2017), which indicate a high level of unwelcoming to surveillance. However, individuals living in authoritarian nations may not prioritize privacy concerns to the same extent. A well-established observation in the field of human rights research is the connection between democratic governance and a higher regard for human rights, including the pivotal aspect of privacy (Poe et al. 1999; Davenport 2006; 2007; Keith, Tate, and Poe 2009; Conrad and Moore 2010; Keith 2011). In autocratic societies, citizens often hold limited expectations regarding their civil liberties (Su, Xu, and Cao, 2021). Based on the findings from Su, Xu, and Cao (2021), it is also happening in China. From their research, they identify that Chinese people are quite welcome to all kinds of surveillance from the government. For the reason of that, they provide three possibilities, including trust in government (Denemark, 2012), information available to citizens (Jenkins, 2014; Lyon, 2014), and concern for safety and terrorism (Davis and Silver, 2004). The first possibility indicates the citizens believe that the political authority will not misuse their power without constantly scrutinizing (Denemark, 2012). The second possibility indicates the high exposure under authoritarian propaganda make people believe the necessity of surveillance (Jenkins, 2014; Lyon, 2014). The third one indicates the fact that there have been numerous instances where the public has shown a willingness to sacrifice a degree of their liberty in exchange for a sense of safety, particularly when they perceive their nation to be facing security challenges (Huddy et al. 2005; Huddy, Feldman and Weber 2007). According to their result, only the third reason mainly explains the popular support of surveillance for Chinese people, indicating that most of Chinese people prioritize social stability and are willing to sacrifice privacy. However, their research has a small flaw regarding finding the connection between information exposure and surveillance agreement. Based on their argument, they expect that people expose themselves more to typical propaganda such as newspapers, broadcasts, and TV are more likely to show agreement on government surveillance compared to the people who expose themselves more on social media. It is correct that different types of media might use different framings on surveillance policies. But even for social media, it still comes under strong supervision from the government, as I have discussed above. More importantly, as social media is an interactive platform, there is evidence that the Chinese authorities may use phishing enforcement strategies to lure resistant individuals (Qin, Stromberg, and Wu, 2017), which increases the risk of spreading sensitive information through social media. Therefore, from their research, we cannot claim that information exposure is not important enough to influence people's acceptance of surveillance. However, the main conclusion on social stability that is prioritized by Chinese people still worth discussing. It is a reasonable assumption that people who have suffered terrorist issues are more

likely to sacrifice a degree of their liberty in exchange for a sense of safety. Ironically, Chinese people do not have terrorism concerns (Su, Xu, and Cao, 2021). Their high preference for social stability needs another explanation. The research on Chinese propaganda gives me some clues on that.

Chinese authorities have been known to employ various tactics to shape the narrative about democratic societies to bolster their own regime's legitimacy and maintain social stability within China. These efforts often involve portraying democratic systems as chaotic, corrupt, and unstable in contrast to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rule, which is framed as providing stability and economic growth (Brady, 2019; Kalathil, 2018; Waler, 2017). Due to these facts, Chinese authorities play an important role in Chinese people's minds as social stability protectors and economic growth guarantors. Not to mention the 'Great Firewall of China' implemented by the Chinese government to regulate and restrict access to foreign websites and online content that is considered politically sensitive or harmful to its interests. As it is difficult for Chinese people to recognize the whole picture of democratic society, the ethical social position of CCP as Chinese authority has been legitimized. To protect social stability, any form of resistance activities that may potentially question the legitimacy of the Chinese authority can be treated as a threat to social stability, which consequently can be identified as unethical behaviours. This inference can explain the reason from my research why Chinese people identify online collective action that can cause a wide range of attention as immoral behaviours. The widespread resistance activities unquestionably shake the legitimacy of the Chinese authority, which highlights the potential threat to social stability based on the cognition of Chinese people. In this sense, using social media to spread sensitive information will be the behaviour that is ethically wrong. Therefore, corresponding to the facts that most of the resistance activities are not targeted at the political level since 1989, as I have discussed in previous chapters. On the one hand, it may be caused by the fear of violent repression. On the other hand, it is their cognitive ethical dilemma facing by Chinese people, who cannot disconnect social stability from the authoritarian regime. This dilemma can stem from the discouragement of spontaneous social activities by Chinese people attributing to experience lacking and long-term information block caused by the authority. To further understand this discouragement reflected from Chinese people, I will evolve the discussion from a philosophical context: Rationalism and Empiricism.

### 5.3 Rationalism and Empiricism

In the realm of philosophy, the issue of scepticism is commonly divided into two distinct approaches: rationalism and empiricism (Mutiani, Disman, Wiyanarti, Abbas, Hadi, Subiyakto, 2022). To start with, rationalism finds its linguistic origins in the English adaptation of the term "rationalism." Etymologically speaking, this word traces back to the Latin "ratio," which translates to "reason" (Mutiani et.al., 2022). In a broader sense, rationalism, at its core, asserts that "reason serves as the primary source of knowledge and justification." According to those who adhere to rationalism, it entails the proposition of fundamental axioms that serve as the foundation for constructing a system of thought rooted in "ideas." These ideas must possess qualities of clarity, steadfastness, and originate from human cognition (James, 2010; Kattsoff, 2004). The human intellect, being the conduit through which ideas are comprehended, is thereby capable of attaining genuine knowledge, which is inherently infallible. Consequently, ideas are considered an inherent component of fundamental reality and the human intellect itself (Magnis, 2002). Rationalists firmly assert that the human mind can apprehend a principle, and thus, the existence of that principle is a requisite. If a principle were non-existent, it would be impossible for humans to describe it. This assertion constitutes an a priori proposition, meaning that the principle's development does not stem from empirical experience. On the contrary, empirical experience is comprehensible only when viewed through the lens of these principles (Tjahjadi, 2004).

Empiricism originates from the English words "empiricism" and "experience." Its etymological roots can be traced back to the Greek terms "empeiria" and "experientia," signifying concepts such as "experienced in," "acquainted with," or "skilled for" (Mutiani et.al., 2022). Empiricism represents a viewpoint that places reliance, either wholly or partially, on experience garnered through sensory

perception as the foundation of knowledge. This perspective marks a significant departure from the rationalist viewpoint, epitomized by Plato's assertion that "what the five senses perceive is only the world of symptoms, which are pseudo, unreal, and imperfect" (Kattsoff, 2004).

Empiricists contend that genuine knowledge must be grounded in sensory, empirical information. Within this framework, the five senses assume paramount importance in contrast to reason for several reasons. Firstly, every assertion or proposition we make is either a direct result of experiences or is inferred from these experiences. Secondly, our ability to conceptualize or form ideas about any subject is contingent upon information obtained through experience. Lastly, the faculty of reason can only effectively operate when it is tethered to the realm of reality or experience (Akhmadi, 2007; Honer & Hunt, 2003).

In his work "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding," John Locke expounded the notion that all concepts and ideas that convey human knowledge are derived from human experiences. These concepts and ideas find their origins in the information gathered through the five senses or in the reflections upon that which has been perceived. According to Locke, the human soul is a blank slate, termed "tabula rasa," implying that any specific concept or idea about the world must be the result of experience. Locke further classified ideas into two categories: simple and complex. Simple ideas are those that are directly acquired through the five senses, occurring spontaneously. By engaging in the processes of thought, doubt, inquiry, classification, and the mental processing of sensory input, more intricate ideas are engendered through reflection. Locke's ultimate conclusion was that simple ideas cannot be erroneous, whereas complex ideas are susceptible to error. Another luminary among empiricist thinkers, David Hume, articulated in his work "An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding" that human comprehension is shaped by a foundational certainty concerning the external world. This certainty, Hume argued, is attainable through innate human faculties for scientific inquiry. Within the human psyche, two distinct mental processes are at play (Honer & Hunt, 2003). The first category is "impressions," which encompass all forms of vivid and immediate sensory perceptions. The second category comprises "thoughts" or "ideas," which are comparatively less vibrant and direct. Impressions serve as the source of simple ideas, originating from objects directly perceived by our five senses. These simple ideas then serve as the foundation for the human mind to generate complex ideas that are not directly perceived through our sensory faculties. David Hume's perspective aligns with John Locke's assertion that through experience, humans can attain new knowledge.

According to the discussion above, the fundamental disagreement extends to the nature of knowledge itself. Rationalists believe that knowledge derived from reason is certain and universal, while empiricists argue that knowledge grounded in sensory experience is contingent and subject to revision. The conflict also surfaces in the role of reasoning versus experience: rationalists prioritize reasoning as the primary tool for gaining knowledge, whereas empiricists assert that reason must always reference experience. Due to these facts, it is not essential for a rationalist to experience different events during social activities to gain enough knowledge to make appropriate decisions. But for an empiricist, to guarantee the freedom of each individual becomes important to make sure everyone has enough experiences to make wise decisions in their field. In this sense, empiricism can naturally reject authoritarian principles on strong social control that legitimize supervision on social media. The distinction between these two epistemological concepts reflects different understandings on the concept of freedom corresponding to the relationship between individuals and social structure, which can connect to the phenomena in the Chinese context.

The tendency to emphasize more on reason and logic other than sensory experience will naturally attract hierarchical social structure as people's capacity for reasoning and logic can be ranked stemming from education and natural talent. It legitimizes the phenomenon of individuals with perfect educational backgrounds and extraordinary talent for reasoning, as described by Plato as 'philosopher-kings,' gaining power in society as rulers, leading to an authoritarian society. In contrast to rationalism, empiricism indicates the importance of individuals' unique sensory experiences as the

key to making decisions. For instance, the wise king in the castle cannot make a better prediction than a local confectioner on which kind of pastry can prevail in the next season. This epistemology will naturally attract a more egalitarian social system that respects the opinions of individuals with different experiences who can provide different angles to problems, leading to a more multilateral problem-solving process following a more democratic social system reflecting the third ethical consideration mentioned by this research. Of course, it's accurate to say that many people incorporate elements of both rationalism and empiricism in their thinking and approach to understanding the world. In practice, it's common for individuals to recognize the value of both reason and empirical evidence in various aspects of life. But people may have a different tendency towards these two epistemologies, leaning more towards rationalism or empiricism. Some rationalists may even reject authoritarianism on the basis of rational arguments related to individual rights, freedoms, and the potential for abuses of power in authoritarian systems. They might argue that authoritarianism often lacks transparency, accountability, and justification based on rational principles. Unfortunately, that rejection relies on precise analysis and understanding to social system based on a great power of reasoning, which is difficult for the majority to achieve. This difficulty and natural attraction to hierarchy make rationalism more likely to be attached to authoritarian regimes like China. According to Diefenbach's (2013) description of dictators' traits under public propaganda, they always be described as the combination of the wise and the selfless. Within a rationalism prevailed authoritarian region, people will be persuaded by themselves to hand over their social power and let superiors who contain higher power of reasoning make decisions for them, which indicates a self-weakening process in subordinates and social margin groups. This phenomenon led to the discouragement to establish or participate spontaneous social activities by Chinese people and corresponds to the trait from a cultural aspect, which is collectivism.

#### 5.4 Collectivism and individualism

According to Schwartz (1990), collectivist societies can be characterized as communal communities defined by diffuse and reciprocal obligations and expectations rooted in ascribed statuses. In these societies, social entities sharing a common destiny, common objectives, and shared values are centralized, with the personal aspect being merely one component of the social structure. This central emphasis on the in-group makes it the primary unit of analysis, as exemplified by the work of Triandis (1995). This description underscores collectivism as a societal orientation that prioritizes in-groups while distancing itself from out-groups, as articulated by Oyserman (1993). Given that in-groups can encompass various entities such as family, clan, ethnicity, religion, and other groups, scholars like Hui (1988) and Triandis (1995), among others, have posited that collectivism is a multifaceted concept that unites culturally diverse perspectives on different types and levels of referent groups.

The potential implications of collectivism for psychology, specifically concerning self-concept, well-being, and attribution style, can be readily identified. Firstly, concerning self-concept, collectivism suggests that one's identity heavily revolves around group membership (Hofstede, 1980; Hsu, 1983; U. Kim, 1994; Markus & Kitayama, 1991), and highly valued personal traits are aligned with collectivist goals, such as sacrificing for the common good and maintaining harmonious relationships with close associates (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Oyserman, 1993; Triandis, 1995) implying obedience tendency. Secondly, in terms of well-being and the expression of emotions, collectivism implies that life satisfaction stems from effectively fulfilling social roles and responsibilities while avoiding shortcomings in these areas (as highlighted by U. Kim, 1994; Kwan & Singelis, 1998; Markus & Kitayama, 1991), and the restraint in expressing emotions, rather than openly and directly articulating personal feelings, is likely to be esteemed as a method of preserving in-group harmony sacrificing the voice of unfair. Thirdly, in terms of judgment, the way causality is reasoned, and attributions are made, the concepts of collectivism propose that social context, situational limitations, and social roles play a significant role in how people perceive individuals and reason about causality (Miller, 1984; Morris & Peng, 1994), and meaning is closely tied to its context, and memories are likely to retain intricate, contextually embedded details.

Many scholars have articulated the link between collectivism and hierarchical systems (Linz, 2000; Hofstede, 1980; Hall, 1976). As Hofstede (1980) described in his work, in collectivist cultures, there is often a strong emphasis on hierarchy and respect for authority. Members of such cultures are more likely to accept and expect hierarchical structures in various aspects of life, including family, work, and society. Based on the research from Linz (2000), the state often claims to represent the collective will of the people, emphasizing collectivism and common ownership of resources in communist or socialist regimes. While these ideologies may promote ideals of equality and shared prosperity, the practical implementation of such systems can sometimes result in the concentration of power in a centralized hierarchy (Linz, 2000). According to the discussion on rationalism, the acceptance to rank reasoning capability to each individual implies a hierarchical system. The over-concentration on rationalism rather than empiricism legitimizes the social role of the superior and subordinate, respectively as the decision-maker and executor. By using propaganda and information blockage to the public, to shape a perfect leader with extraordinary reasoning power significantly higher than ordinary people is not a difficult task. Due to the discouragement from subordinates on their capacity for reasoning power, they unquestionably follow the lead of superiors, even sacrificing themselves for the good of the 'majority' or 'long-term'. This phenomenon manifests itself as collectivism that emphasizes hierarchy and respect for authority. Collectivism suppresses reasoning and logic according to individuals' emotion and experience from subordinates, correspond to rejecting empiricism that emphasizes knowledge grounded in sensory, empirical information regardless of the hierarchical position of individuals. Therefore, the more empiricist culture indicates the opposite traits of collectivism, which can be named as individualism.

Hofstede (1980) characterized individualism as a focus on personal rights over duties, a preoccupation with oneself and immediate family, an emphasis on personal autonomy and self-fulfilment, and the establishment of one's identity based on personal achievements. Waterman (1984) described normative individualism as an emphasis on personal responsibility and the freedom to make choices, the aspiration to reach one's potential, and a commitment to respecting the integrity of others. Schwartz (1990) defined individualistic societies as essentially contractual, comprising small primary groups and negotiated social relationships, with specific obligations and expectations oriented toward gaining status. These definitions all portray individualism as a perspective that places personal aspects like personal goals, individual uniqueness, and personal control at the forefront, while considering social elements as relatively less central (Bellah et al., 1985; Hsu, 1983; Kagitcibasi, 1994; U. Kim, 1994; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Sampson, 1977; Triandis, 1995).

With these definitions in mind, the potential effects of individualism on various aspects of psychology, including self-concept, well-being, and attribution style, become apparent. Firstly, concerning self-concept, individualism suggests that cultivating and preserving a positive self-image is a fundamental human pursuit (as noted by Baumeister, 1998); experiencing a sense of self-worth, personal achievement, and possessing unique or distinct personal beliefs and viewpoints are highly valued (Oyserman & Markus, 1993; Triandis, 1995); and abstract qualities (in contrast to social or situational descriptions) hold a central role in defining oneself (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998).

Secondly, regarding well-being, individualism implies that openly expressing emotions and attaining one's personal goals are significant sources of contentment and life satisfaction (as highlighted by Diener & Diener, 1995; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Thirdly, individualism suggests that judgments, reasoning, and the attribution of causes are generally focused on individuals rather than on the situation or social context, assuming that the decontextualized self is a stable and causal link (Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999; Miller, 1984; Morris & Peng, 1994; Newman, 1993). Consequently, individualism promotes a decontextualized reasoning style, rather than one that is situation-specific, presuming that social information is not tied to its social context.

The emphasizing of experiencing a sense of self-worth and personal achievement under individualism

culture promotes the knowledge-creating process based on empiricism guidelines. The advocating of emotion expression makes any form of ethical considerations freely discussable. The reasoning and judgment highlighting subjective initiative, but not intricate situational limitations indicate individuals' level of confidence and willingness to spontaneous social activities. Dictators will not be happy to confront behaviours that indicate a personal disregard for supervision or the control system. The free environment that encourages citizens to engage in ethical debates will unquestionably challenge the legitimacy of authority. Grassroots spontaneous collective social activities can also be regarded as a threat to an authoritarian regime. Therefore, these cultural traits can be regarded as natural weapons against the hierarchical system or an authoritarian regime. In the Chinese context, the more rationalism tendency and collectivism cultural traits fit each other to serve the hierarchical system with a unique ethical consideration from subordinate groups tending to self-undermining behaviours for the sake of stability of the society they believe in. From the organizational level within the domination of collectivist culture, people are more likely to spontaneously identify themselves as members of certain groups, even if the group does not explicitly request or require such identification (Schwartz, 2001; Bond, 1991). This tendency is a characteristic of collectivist societies, where individuals often prioritize their group identity and affiliations as an integral part of their self-concept (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). This phenomenon better explains why the participants in my research defining online protest as immoral even though this method has great potential to achieve extra support from society. As the workers in the factory, they naturally identified themselves as part of the organization. Without any 'union' to steal their sense of identity, the behaviours that spread dirt on their organization, such as online protest, will be easily defined as immoral behaviours. Therefore, the more empiricism epistemology and more individualist culture will be the way to break the moral dilemma held by the Chinese people, and correspondingly reinforce the power of spontaneous social activities in China. According to the discussion from the previous chapter on hierarchical theories from Diefenbach (2013) indicates the key to altering mindsets, including ethical considerations, should rely on social activities that people participate in. The argument from Scott (1990) indicates not all social activities can be monitored or be concentrated by authority. There is always a place for individuals to play as themselves and involve in social activities. It is undeniable that social media create this kind of platform. Via social media, users can post text, photos, videos, and other forms of content to express their thoughts, creativity, and emotions. Social media platforms offer a space for self-expression, where individuals can showcase their individuality. Not only for this, but social media has also been instrumental in amplifying individual voices in various social and political movements. It provides a platform for individuals to advocate for causes and issues that are personally meaningful to them. As the chapter mentioned above, not all information from social media will be supervised by authority if they do not find the link between information and a direct threat to the ethical legitimacy of the regime. In this sense, the platform of social media has provided a relatively free environment for the Chinese people to participate in social activities. By freely expressing their own emotions and thoughts based on their sensory judgment in a safer environment compared to the real world, it is a reasonable inference that Chinese people who involve more in social media are more likely to reflect individualist traits. If this inference is correct, leading by the development of social media, people's ethical considerations will also change with that as a hidden power threatening the ethical legitimacy of the authoritarian regime. As a result, more and more people will achieve the third ethical consideration as potential leaders of value-based collective actions.

In the research, there is a result that is easily overlooked. Most of the people defining online protest as immoral behaviours belong to stage 3, who have not achieved the third ethical consideration. Only two participants out of twelve in stage 4, who have achieved all three ethical considerations, have moral concerns about online protest. It indicates that people who are holding positive view to pursue equal treatment and negotiation reflecting individualist and empiricist principles are not likely to have moral concern on online protest. The only two participants in stage 4 also define online protest as immoral behaviours, which might be caused by a collectivist view that people should not betray the group they belong to. Therefore, according to the discussion, I can provide some guidance for future research.

## 5.5 Chapter conclusion:

This research focuses on the three ethical considerations that challenge the legitimacy of hierarchical systems and authoritarian regimes. According to the results of the research, I have identified another element that prevents the development of collective voice and action, as reflected by individuals' moral concerns regarding online protests. Based on the discussions in this chapter, I find that these moral concerns are potentially related to rationalism from an epistemological aspect and collectivism from a cultural aspect. The strong emphasis on internal reasoning and logic promotes hierarchical social structures based on individuals' reasoning capacity. Collectivism, which emphasizes obedience and self-sacrifice to the group, legitimizes the social hierarchy between superiors and subordinates. In contrast, empiricism provides theoretical support to guarantee individual freedom in society and advocates for a more multilateral problem-solving process, fostering a more democratic social system. The individualist view, guided by empiricism, enhances individuals' confidence and willingness as citizens to establish or participate in spontaneous social activities that support a democratic and egalitarian system. The effective cooperation between empiricism and individualism legitimizes the third ethical consideration: "Pursuing Equality through Consensus Negotiation." In this sense, any future research focusing on the epistemological choice between rationalism and empiricism in the Chinese context, or the cultural research comparing collectivism and individualism among Chinese people, can be related to the challenge of hierarchical systems and authoritarian regimes in China. In this chapter, I also indicate the potential relationship between epistemology and culture, which can be regarded as a vast field to explore more tangible evidence to articulate their relationship. Due to the limitations of this research, which includes only 60 subjects to guarantee the reliability of the data in a positivist design, having more participants in this type of research will help me capture the whole picture of ethics and better understand the potential supporters of collective voice and action in the Chinese context. To develop these three ethical considerations, addressing cultural issues is something that cannot be ignored. Despite the fact that two participants hold the third ethical consideration, they still cannot completely escape the influence of collectivism. This may create some barriers for the development of collective voice and actions, especially when seeking additional support from other social classes or regions. For the next chapter, which is also the last one, I will provide a summary of this thesis.

According to the result of my finding, a higher percentage of individuals from the post-1980s generation, 44%, hold ethical principles opposing hierarchy and advocating for collective bargaining, in contrast to the older generational group, where only 35% of individuals oppose hierarchy. This finding suggests a notable shift in values and ethical perspectives among the generations born after 1980, away from the earlier generations that supported the hierarchical system. This shift consequently encourages union activities in accordance with Western definitions.

In the subsequent section of the findings, the research explores the preferences for various forms of resistance activities among individuals who share values potentially aligned with collective bargaining. The results indicate that most people favour a third-party approach, resembling the resolution seen during the Honda incident. However, younger generations display a stronger inclination towards opting for "extreme methods" like strikes to address employment conflicts. This choice reflects their willingness to challenge their employers, potentially posing an additional challenge to China's current hierarchical system. This preference may also correspond with the life-cycle theory, which suggests that every generation follows a conventional trajectory of development, with individuals gradually becoming more conservative and collectively oriented as they age. However, as this research lacks a longitudinal design, it cannot definitively affirm this hypothesis, underscoring the need for further longitudinal research to establish its validity. Overall, most participants in this section exhibit no inconsistencies with their ethical considerations.

In the context of interviews regarding online protests, only six individuals, three from the younger generation and three from the older generation, express their support. The remaining participants do not endorse online protests. On one hand, this implies stringent oversight of social media in the Chinese context, making it difficult to carry out online protests and potentially resulting in legal repercussions, which require further examination. On the other hand, many participants believe that online protests raise moral concerns and can tarnish an organization's reputation or be construed as illegal actions. These circumstances prompt inquiries into why people possess this unique ethical consideration that inherently discourages anti-hierarchical behaviours.

Then the discussion chapter provides a reasonable inference that these moral concerns are potentially related to rationalism from an epistemological aspect and collectivism from a cultural aspect. The strong emphasis on internal reasoning and logic reinforces hierarchical social structures, which are founded on individuals' capacity for rational thought. Collectivism, which prioritizes obedience and self-sacrifice for the group, validates the existence of a social hierarchy with superiors and subordinates. Different from rationalism, empiricism provides a theoretical foundation for safeguarding individual freedom within society and promotes a more diverse approach to problem-solving, fostering a democratic social system. The individualist perspective, guided by empiricism, bolsters individuals' confidence and their willingness to engage as active citizens in spontaneous social activities that uphold a democratic and egalitarian system. The effective interplay between empiricism and individualism lends legitimacy to the third ethical consideration: "Pursuing Equality through Consensus Negotiation."

The research focuses on ethical considerations from Chinese working class to examine the possibilities for collective expression within the Chinese framework. The reason of this research focus related to the unique authoritarian political context in China and theoretical support from Diefenbach's extensive hierarchical theory in 2013. On the one hand, the primary hindrance to the advancement of collective expression arises from the lack of support from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In other words, in the absence of a central authority dictating the direction of union-related activities, the working class could potentially create a different storyline for collective representation, driven by an increase in labour disputes. On the other hand, even without political control as China, the union's situation in West is not optimistic such as the problem leading by 'capital disconnected'. In contrast to the Chinese scenario, where the presence of political parties or the government doesn't impede the existence of labour unions in a capitalist society, Western labour

unions encounter similar challenges, often finding themselves in a vulnerable position within a hierarchy dominated by capital. Scholars affiliated with the Frankfurt School, influenced by thinkers like Marx, underscore that the acceptance of hierarchy is deeply embedded in culture and institutionally shaped. To uphold the dominance of capital, a prevailing culture has developed that legitimizes and obscures disparities within capitalist societies. Consequently, this hierarchical structure has gained approval from the general public, including those who are most marginalized.

The reverence for hierarchy highlights the shared characteristics between China and the Western world regarding the course of collective expression and action. Hence, the rejection of Chinese political authority alone cannot genuinely pave the way for the establishment of independent unions in the Chinese context, as it continues to be overshadowed by the prevalence of the hierarchical concept. In this sense, the real challenge for union is how to break the prevalence of the hierarchical concept in both Chinese and western contexts.

According to Diefenbach's extensive hierarchical theory from 2013, as well as other relevant social structure theories put forth by Giddens in 1984 and the social dominance theory proposed by Sidanius in 2004, I can deduce that values and ethical considerations play a central role in both fortifying and restraining the hierarchical system. In my analysis, I applied Kohlberg's 1973 theory of moral development to pinpoint three ethical principles that propel union activities as manifestations of social involvement. As the idea of collective action through unions is rooted in Western ethical values, it becomes imperative to adapt this concept to the Chinese context. Achieving this adaptation necessitates a fundamental prerequisite: the alignment of ethical principles within the Chinese working class. Consequently, delving into the realm of ethics and values concerning collective expression among the Chinese working class represents a substantial and meaningful undertaking.

The research identifies ethics and values as one of the key inner strength for collective voice. It can also inspire a debate about non-union voices within organizations. Must such voices rely on unions? This research introduces another criterion based on organizational cultural perspectives. In this context, I can argue that organizations that embrace a culture opposed to the hierarchical concept ensuring the feasibility of non-union voices. Therefore, future research on non-union voices can further investigate this argument to safeguard workers' rights.

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