

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

**A Qualitative Inquiry into Chinese Workers' Understanding
of the Key Psychological Contract Concepts of 'Obligation',
'Promise' and 'the Other Party'**

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by

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Life is a miracle; I am perfectly imperfect.

For my mother, and my late grandparents, who taught me to be kind,
grateful, honest, and hopeful; to my father who cultivated my adaptability
and resilience.

ABSTRACT

This study examined Chinese workers' interpretations of the key psychological contract concepts of 'obligation', 'promise' and 'the other party'. It also explored how Chinese workers described their implicit employment terms. Although the findings of this thesis may be context-constrained, the related discussions and implications provide general and useful insights for the psychological contract and its literature.

A qualitative methodology was adopted for the research. The sampling frame comprised 61 Chinese workers in Xiamen and Fushun, recruited by a variety maximisation strategy. Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews, whose duration (recording time) was between 22 and 98 minutes (with a mode of 30-45 minutes), and analysed with the general guidance provided by the template analysis (King, 2004).

It was found that 'obligation' was an ambiguous term in the Chinese employment context, suggesting a possibility that 'obligation' may not be unambiguous in other contexts either. The findings on the notion of 'promise' in China revealed that it carried strong moral significance and had emotional importance, leading to a reflection that the theoretical specifications of promise (Rousseau, 1995) had not been appropriately reflected in prior empirical research. It was also found that the immediate supervisors were very powerful 'the other party' in the Chinese employment context, implying that empirical psychological contract studies may not appropriately reflect the theory or phenomena, especially in light of the revealed complexities of Chinese employment

arrangements. The Chinese workers' employment experiences revealed that their perceived implicit employment terms were below the terms specified in their legal contract, if a contract was existent. This finding was found to relate to perceived significant power gaps between employment parties by participants, which were embedded in the complex relationships between the zone of negotiability, the societal context of employment and the powerful leader positions in China. The discussion, and reflection, of these findings at an integrated level suggests that the existing theory lacks adequate theoretical clarity to appropriately inform deductive studies. It also suggests that the majority of empirical results, consequently, may need to be re-examined. This thesis concludes that the psychological contract is a useful concept to make sense of events, beliefs and experiences at work, but there are urgent needs for further theoretical developments, especially with regard to power and morality, and thus more grounded research in order to make it an adequately testable theory.

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CONTENTS

Abstract	i
Memories of Gratitude	iii
Table of Contents	v
List of Figures and Tables	ix
1. INTRODUCTION	<u>1</u>
1.1 Background	4
1.2 Employment Relationships in China	7
1.2.1 Chinese Labour Law and Employment Transformations	8
1.2.2 Features of Chinese Employment Relationships.....	12
1.3 Research Rationale and Aim	14
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	18
2.1 Historical Overview	18
2.1.1 Early Research	19
2.1.2 Contemporary Research.....	21
2.2 Theoretical Fundamentals of the Psychological Contract	27
2.2.1 Psychological Contract Content.....	27
2.2.2 Psychological Contract Fulfilment.....	29
2.2.3 Psychological Contracting Stages	32
2.3 Perceptions of Obligations	34
2.3.1 Psychological Contracts as Schemas	34
2.3.2 Socio-cultural Influences on Schemas and Schema-based Obligations ..	38
2.3.3 Promise-based Psychological Contracts	43

2.4	Parties to Psychological Contracts	51
2.5	The Paradox of Subjectivity and Mutuality in Psychological Contracts ...	58
2.5.1	Factors Relating to Individual Perceptions	59
2.5.2	Factors Influencing Mutuality	65
2.5.3	Socio-cultural Influences on Psychological Contracts.....	69
2.5.3.1	Predisposition.....	70
2.5.3.2	Business Practices	70
2.5.3.3	Social Cues.....	72
2.5.4	Psychological Contracts in China	75
3.	METHODOLOGY	84
3.1	Methodological Issues in Psychological Contract Research	84
3.2	Epistemological Principles Underpinning Qualitative Research	88
3.3	Research Design Rationale	91
3.4	Participant Selection	94
3.5	Interviews	98
3.6	Research Ethics, Quality and Limitations	103
3.6.1	Research Ethics	103
3.6.2	Research Quality	105
3.6.3	Research Limitations.....	107
3.7	Data Analysis Methods	109
3.8	Notes on Presenting Data and Findings	114
3.8.1	Translation of Text.....	114
3.8.2	Tidying-up Long Quotes	116
3.8.3	Organisation of Findings.....	120
4.	‘OBLIGATION’ (‘YIWU’) IN CHINESE EMPLOYMENT	123
4.1	During the Fieldwork	125

4.2 Unfolding of Data Analyses	130
4.2.1 ‘Yiwu’ as Legal Responsibilities	135
4.2.2 ‘Yiwu’ as Implied Reciprocity.....	136
4.2.3 ‘Yiwu’ as Voluntary Commitments.....	137
4.2.4 ‘Yiwu’ as Moral Responsibilities.....	139
4.3 Implications of ‘Yiwu’ as Polysemy	142
4.3.1 ‘Yiwu’, ‘Obligation’ and the Psychological Contract.....	146
4.4 Discussion and Implication	150
4.5 Conclusion and Contribution	158
5. ‘PROMISE’ IN CHINESE EMPLOYMENT	<u>161</u>
5.1 Volition in Promise-Making	162
5.2 Morality in Promise-Keeping	166
5.3 Wider Scope of Employment Promises	172
5.4 Discussion and Implication	176
5.4.1 Cultural/Linguistic Meanings of Promise in China	177
5.4.2 Meanings of Promise and the Psychological Contract.....	180
5.4.3 Morality in Psychological Contracts.....	186
5.5 Conclusion and Contribution	192
6. ‘THE OTHER PARTY’ IN CHINESE EMPLOYMENT	<u>194</u>
6.1 The Other Party as the Employing Organisation	194
6.2 The Other Party as Organisational Agents	200
6.3 The Complexity of Relationships at Work	205
6.3.1 Diversity of Employment Arrangements	213
6.4 Discussion and Implication	217
6.5 Conclusion and Contribution	226

7. IMPLICIT EMPLOYMENT TERMS IN CHINA	<u>229</u>
7.1 Perceived Zone of Negotiability	231
7.2 Societal Context for Employment	239
7.3 Leaders and Leader Powers in Employment.....	247
7.4 Discussion and Implication.....	255
7.4.1 Power and the Psychological Contract.....	255
7.4.2 Role of Societal Context	258
7.4.3 Leader, Workplace Relationships and the Psychological Contract	263
7.5 Conclusion and Contribution.....	266
8. INTEGRATION, REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION	<u>269</u>
8.1 Generalisability of the Psychological Contract	270
8.2 Operationalising the Psychological Contract.....	285
8.3 Concluding Remarks.....	293
8.3.1 Implications and Future Research.....	293
8.3.2 A Few Words for Managers in China	295
8.3.3 A Final Note.....	296
9. References	<u>298</u>
10. Appendices	<u>349</u>
10.1 Appendix A: Additional Ethnographical Approaches.....	349
10.2 Appendix B: Sample Consent Form (in Chinese).....	351
10.3 Appendix C: Summary of Key Findings and Contributions	352

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure 3.1	Methodological Difficulties in the Existing Research	85
Table 2.1	Early Definitions of the Psychological Contract	20
Table 2.2	Typical Transactional and Relational Contract Terms.....	28
Table 2.3	Summary of Research Questions.....	83
Table 3.1	Overview of Participants.....	97
Table 3.2	Contents Covered in All Interviews.....	100
Table 3.3	Key Terms Translated for Interviews	107
Table 3.4	Initial (<i>a priori</i>) Template	111
Table 3.5	Steps of Template Revisions and Finalisation.....	112
Table 3.6	Exemplar Translation Processes	115
Table 3.7	Final Template.....	122

Chapter 1 Introduction

The employee-organisation relationship (EOR) has increasingly become a focal point for researchers in organizational behaviour, human resource management, and industrial relations.

Shore et al. (2004, p291)

The increasing scholarship on employment relationships is in line with the phenomenon of changing employment environments worldwide, driven by 'globalisation, organisational reorganisation and efficiency drives, deregulation, increasingly sophisticated technology, the 24/7 workplace and weakened trade union' (Lewis, Gambles & Rapoport, 2007, p360). Inevitably, there have been transformations in the world of work. Organisations reflect increasing workforce diversities such as boundaryless careers (Arther, 1996) and nonstandard workers (Kalleberg, 2000). Employment is increasingly structured by the re-thinking of the work-life balance (Fleetwood, 2007), intergenerational tensions (Lloyd-Jones & Worley, 2014) and transitions in expectations and commitments of employees (Anderson & Schalk, 1998). Several concepts have been put forward to capture the dynamics of the EOR; the psychological contract is prominent in this literature (see Shore et al., 2004).

The psychological contract is an implicit agreement between an employee and the employer that involves and encourages an ongoing employment exchange (Rousseau,

1995). Based on social exchange theories (e.g., Blau, 1964), the psychological contract is underpinned by the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) maintained by perceived promises (Rousseau, 1989). It differs from other social exchange-based constructs, such as leader-member exchange (LMX), team-member exchange (TMX), and perceived organisational support (POS). For example, LMX measures the perceptions of the quality of the supervisor-subordinate relationship (e.g., Liden & Graen, 1980); TMX refers to the overall quality of relationships among team members (e.g., Seers, 1989); and POS focuses on expected organisational support (e.g., Eisenberger et al., 2001). While the employment relationship studies the employer's perspective of the employment exchange (e.g., Tsui & Wang, 2002), Rousseau's (1989) psychological contract puts the spotlight on employees' perceptions of their exchange obligations with the employer.

This conceptual focus on individual subjectivity also distinguishes the psychological contract from other contracts, such as social, normative, legal, and implied contracts. *Social contracts* embrace values, beliefs, norms and assumptions at a social level (Homans, 1958). They govern 'beliefs about exchange, reciprocity, good faith, and fair dealing' in a given context (Morrison & Robinson, 1997, p246; for in-depth comparisons, see Pesqueux, 2012), although the term 'social contracts' may sometimes be referred to differently (cf., Macneil., 1980; Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999). *Normative contracts* emerge among members associated with a particular group such as a department, a company, an industry or an occupation. They are commonly held beliefs amongst a group of people accounting for shared meanings of each individual's

psychological contract(s) (Rousseau, 1995). *Legal contracts* are enforceable by law. Classical and modern contract theories define somewhat different characteristics of legal contracts (see Eisenberg, 2001). Macneil's (1985) theory of the relational contract has had a manifest impact on Rousseau's (1989) theory of the psychological contract. It rejects objective formalism and emphasises obligations arising from the relationship itself (Macneil, 1980), though its influences on current (American) contract law are debatable (Speidel, 1999). *Implied contracts* 'involve shared norms of behaviour and expectations' (Rousseau, 1989, p130), 'arising from interactions between parties' (Rousseau, 1989, p124). In a sense, they approximate to implied-in-fact contracts in the legal system in that they both may be inferred from patterns and practices as well as historical evidence (Rousseau, 1989). According to Rousseau (1995), implied contracts refer to the attributions that third parties of a contract observe to be its terms, acceptance and mutuality, i.e., 'in the eye of the observer' (Rousseau, 1989, p129). Psychological contracts, on the other hand, exist 'in the eye of the beholder' (Rousseau, 1989, p128).

This analytical focus has attracted tremendous amounts of research, which shows that not only do psychological contracts impact on work outcomes such as job satisfaction, trust and commitment (Zhao et al., 2007; Guest & Clinton, 2005), but is also useful in assessing the psychological state of the workforce, especially in light of a series of research studies sponsored by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (e.g., Guest & Conway, 1998; 1999; 2005). The majority of this research has focused on the content and levels of fulfilment of psychological contracts; others also look into the emotional and psychological states after psychological contract breach (see Chapter 2).

While our knowledge on the psychological contract has predominantly been derived from the West, an up-and-coming stream of psychological contract research has attempted to understand the implications of the theory in non-Western contexts, such as China and Japan (e.g., cf., Rousseau & Schalk, 2000; Hornung & Rousseau, 2012). The present thesis furthers this line of inquiry by studying the psychological contract in the Chinese employment context (cf., Hornung & Rousseau, 2012).

Because the author's industrial experiences in China had meaningful influences in her undertaking the present research, the following section captures and presents these relevant experiences in light of some early stages of this study. Given that the research methodology is qualitative in nature (see Chapter 3), the author chose to write some parts of this thesis in the first person singular where the personal perspective/experiences were deemed important to explain.

1.1 Background

In my years working as a management consultant in China, a particular difficulty encountered by the Chinese managers was an issue of the workplace inequality among workers on different employment arrangements. Such inequalities are complex, can be huge, and sometimes inevitable due to the dualism of employment systems and the rapid transitions in the Chinese employment relations (see Section 1.2¹). For example, a bank teller on a permanent contract usually had much better employment benefits than

¹ Also see Ma, G. X. (2016). A Dualistic View of Employment in China. 14th Annual International Conference on Management, 27-30 June, Athens.

their non-permanent co-workers – in addition to the usual employment terms such as sick and annual leaves – that included insurances covering pension, health, work-related injury, maternity and unemployment, as well as the Housing Fund. These employment benefits are commonly called ‘five insurances and one fund’, i.e., legally required employer’s obligations in China. On the other hand, the employment terms of an agency co-worker who had the same job could be shockingly different. It was common that the managers said to me: ‘I wouldn’t be surprised that the monthly housing fund of a permanent contract worker alone was more than the basic salary of his/her agency co-worker’. Yet, it was usual that a fulltime worker was still ‘non-permanent’, or even not directly hired, after 10 years working with the same company (including public companies). Having always studied abroad after high school, I was curious about and puzzled by the management and experiences of such ‘unfamiliar’ employment circumstances. Without a known theory to effectively manage such work dynamics at the time, I usually coached the managers, while conducting case studies at their companies, to be more flexible on the non-contracted elements of employment. My curiosity about the work experiences in the unique Chinese employment context eventually led me to this thesis: in searching for answers, I was convinced that the psychological contract stood out in the literature for its clear emphasis on the contextual and individual variability.

The original proposal of this project was largely motivated by a troubling theoretical implication that ‘employees will experience less violation in the face of greater ongoing injustice’ (Morrison & Robinson, 1997, p247). I was not sure whether I could agree to

that for its worrying ethical and practical ramifications. As a practitioner, how would I encourage my clients to engage in ‘ongoing injustice’ – something particularly pertinent in China – in order to reduce their workers’ emotional violation? As a researcher, how would I design a study to scientifically measure the ‘right’ amount of injustice at work to maximise its ‘violation reducing effects’? I was baffled, especially in light of the seemingly supportive empirical evidence at that time (e.g., Cassar & Briner, 2011; Sayers et al., 2011). There seemed to be an urgent need to thoroughly study Morrison and Robinson’s (1997) violation model; the Chinese employment context seemed to provide an ideal sample. The afore-mentioned experiences quickly led me to have proposed a study on the violation in China with three research objectives: an exploratory study on the contextualisation of psychological contracts in China, an in-depth study on the violation, and a validation stage to test my thesis.

Despite that the proposal was well received by the examiners, problems started to emerge as soon as the fieldwork began. Some unexpected methodological difficulties arose (see Chapter 4) and the participants’ accounts regarding their employment perceptions appeared unfamiliar in the existing psychological contract literature (see Chapter 7). I felt a need to address these issues immediately and informed my supervisors about my concerns after the first day of the fieldwork. In the first week, a telephone supervisory meeting took place in addition to over two dozen email exchanges. In the first half of the fieldwork (see Chapter 3), another three Skype/telephone supervisory meetings were held to discuss the unexpected data. These supervisory discussions led to a decision to expand the exploratory study to see whether

it would be more interesting, or indeed necessary, to explore in-depth how the psychological contract was manifested in the Chinese context. Owing to both the highly accessible/dependable supervisory support and my own research experiences, I was able to adapt in the fieldwork (see chapters 3 & 4) and focused on the first research objective of the original proposal (see above).

The detailed aim and rationale for this thesis are explained in Section 1.3. The following section portrays a Chinese employment phenomenon featured by a substantial diversification of employment arrangements, resulting from the ongoing employment structure transitions in China (Gallagher, Lee & Kuruvilla, 2011). Note that while China may usually also denote Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan, for the purpose of this study, it specifically refers to mainland China.

1.2 Employment Relationships in China

Since its economic reform starting in 1978, China has grown to become second in the world GDP ranking, having lifted millions of people out of poverty (World Bank, 2015). Parallel to this economic prosperity is a drastic transformation of Chinese employment relationships. Scholars have looked at these issues from a variety of angles, such as informalisation of Chinese labour market (e.g., Park & Cai, 2011), labour force dualism (see Zhang, 2015), and the enterprise reform (e.g., Lin, 2011). For the purpose of this research, I will present a brief history of Chinese labour laws in order to contrast the features of Chinese and Western employment relationships.

1.2.1 Chinese Labour Law and Employment Transformations

Before 1978, labour policies were under a command system (see Zhou, 1955). Lifetime employment was mandatory (Si, Wei & Li, 2008) thus ‘contract-free’, i.e., the ‘*Iron Rice Bowl*’ (Wang, 2008). Under the ‘Iron Rice Bowl’ system, workers were employed by state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and collectively owned enterprises with guaranteed permanent employments and the cradle-to-grave benefit system, including wage, welfare provision, and job security. Under this system of socialist employment relationship started from 1950s, ‘companies’ (公司) rarely existed, in whose place has been ‘unit’ (单位), whereby employees have been administered by centrally planned wages (‘*Iron Wage*’) and state-controlled job appointments and promotions (‘*Iron Chair*’) (i.e., the ‘*Old Three Iron*’, see Bray, 2005).

The idea of a ‘dual-system’ (双轨制), i.e., a duality of centralised planning supplemented by contracts, was proposed and implemented by the then Vice-President Liu Shaoqi in 1956 (see Chong, 1958; He, 1958); but it was only promoted by the Ministry of Labour in 1983 (Notice on Actively Promoting Labour Contracts, 1983). By then, only 650,000 workers were on employment contracts; a year later, the number increased to 40 million (Liu & Lu, 1996). In 1986, the Temporary Regulations on the Labour Contract was tested and, in 1994, was passed as the National Labour Law.

A year later, this first national labour law took effect in three-fifths of contract-related content, heralding the end of the ‘Iron Rice Bowl’ period and indicating the start of a new page on Chinese industrial relations. The labour contract system was legislated into

law as the basic mode of employment, intending to suit a market economy with well-protected labour rights. It spelled out employment standards, such as daily and weekly working hours, overtime restrictions, and social insurances for retirement, illness, maternity leave and unemployment. However, its clauses were vague and legal penalties for non-compliance were lacking, leading to significantly reduced bargaining power of workers and increased employment insecurity (Xu, 2007). The poorly regulated employment practices were highlighted by Friedman and Lee (2010), who drew on a report to demonstrate that only about half of the companies signed contracts with their contract workers. These workers had at best limited job security or access to social protections and/or benefits tied up to employment contracts, if any.

The second national labour law took effect in 2008. Employers' legal obligations were more detailed, wherein protections for fixed-term contract workers were tightened. It further categorised and explained contract types, emphasising that the mandatory contract-signing practice must be according to the work content and nature. The new law (2008) has a far-reaching effect on the Chinese employment structure. Because fixed-term contract workers became less convenient and more expensive to use, there was a sharp increase of agency workers, resulting from employers' continued search for alternative strategies to evade labour legislation (e.g., Zhang, 2011; Swider, 2011). A recent estimate found nine percent of the total Chinese labour force in 2011 were agency workers (Dong & Wang, 2012). These workers, many of whom were transferred from or recruited to replace the fixed-term contracts, face similar social benefits limitations and employment inequalities.

To improve employment security and alleviate employment inequalities, the latest amendments of the Labour Contract Law took effect on 1 July 2013, with the most visible changes regarding agency workers. Under the amended law, the use of agency workers is restricted to temporary vacancies (shorter than six months), substitutive vacancies (replacements for on-leave employees), and/or supplementary works (not involving ‘core businesses’). It explains that employers are not allowed to divide contract periods into shorter vacancies to use agency workers, for whom ‘equal pay for equal work’ practices were for the first time explicitly emphasised. In addition, labour agencies, who previously tended to hire workers according to the lengths of their respective client contracts, are now required to sign at least two-year-fixed-term contracts with their workers. In addition, labour agency set-up requirements are also increased and more specified.

Another substantial amendment was the extended clause on fixed-term contracts, whereby employers are required to sign permanent contracts with employees who have worked for either 10 consecutive years or two consecutive (fixed) terms. However, legal specifications have been deliberately exploited by Chinese employers and poorly reinforced by local governments. For example, the Agriculture Bank of China has recently recruited on eight-year-fixed-term contracts; within the contract period, these ‘temporary’ workers will ‘voluntarily’ work as window-tellers without any form of career advancement.

While the real regulatory effects of the labour law are yet to be seen, its latest

definitions (2013) of Chinese contract categorisations are summarised below (in the same order by law):

a) Fixed-term contract

This refers to contracts with *finite* time frames.

b) Permanent contract

This refers to contracts with *infinite* time frames. Note, again, these contracts are not equal to the ‘Iron Rice Bowl’ – the former reflects capitalism whereas the latter is under the socialism umbrella.

c) Specific contract

This refers to contracts that mature upon the completion of specified job/project contents.

d) Collective contract

This refers to contracts that are collectively negotiated by employees with the employer that are mainly union contracts.

e) Agency contract

Agency contracts, literally translated as ‘dispatched contracts’ and commonly known as ‘third-party contracts’ (see Bi & Yan, 2007), are not defined by the law. It is implied, though, that agency workers refer to those that provide services to client

organisations that have contracts with labour agencies with whom the workers sign fixed-term contracts.

f) Non-fulltime contract

This applies to workers paid on an hourly basis and work for an employer for no more than four hours per day and 24 hours per week.

Despite the fact that the above appear very similar to the West, the Chinese employment is rather distinct in its own right. I will discuss this in light of the Western literature.

1.2.2 Features of Chinese Employment Relationships

Although some may argue that the Chinese employment transformation from the socialism to the contract-based approach has been largely completed (Gallagher, Lee & Kuruvilla, 2011), a change to a labour system that bears real resemblance to the West would still seem far away. From the employment point of view, the most visible but neglected observation is that fixed-term contracts are implied by law as the mainstream employment in China, whereas they have always been studied as alternative employment arrangements elsewhere (see De Cuyper et al., 2008). This subtle difference is profound because it implies contrasting assumptions and logics of employment arrangements.

In the Western context, the logic of using alternative work arrangements without guaranteed job/career securities, more commonly referred to as atypical or nonstandard

employment (see Kalleberg, 2000), aims to cope with business needs and corporate strategies. The rise of 'new patterns' of contractual relationships were driven by market forces (Atkinson, 1984, p318) in the Anglo-American world, where permanent work is still regarded as 'traditional', 'typical' and 'standard'. In other words, core jobs are primarily designed as or assumed to be permanent; the use of non-permanent workers are not to fill such vacancies but as secondary sources of labour to 'help out'. Whereas in China, the emergence and growth of contract workers were promoted at national policy levels; the 'traditional', 'typical' or 'standard' permanent employment, i.e., the 'Iron Rice Bowl', was almost forced to fade out from the employment structure for the political-economic reform. In these contexts, the use of non-permanent workers has been (legally) viewed to be primary, probably to promote the employment transformation. Consequently, non-permanent workers only become (contractually) permanent when the law dictates so, assuming it is enforced effectively. In other words, many jobs are usually expected to be filled with non-permanent workers; the upgrading to permanent contracts is secondary, and adopted only when unavoidable. Worse still, many Chinese employers even avoid offering employment contracts. According to Park and Cai (2011) and based on a report by the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2006), 36 percent of the urban workforce are working without employment contracts.

Near the other extreme are some workers under a socialist employment scheme which closely resembles the 'Iron Rice Bowl' system. These workers are subject to the Public Institutions Staff Management Regulations (2014), and Civil Servant Law (2006) before that. They, for example, follow the Temporary Disciplinary Regulations of Public

Institutions Personnel (2012) for the disciplinary employment procedures, whereas their contract co-workers, permanent or not, are managed by the Labour Contract Law (2008). Yet, a minority who are usually employed directly by central/local governments is still under the 'Iron Rice Bowl' system (though it is no longer called so) and subject to a different set of work regulations.

Consequently, a salient outcome of the current state of Chinese employment relationships is marked diversification (see Chapter 6). The 'experimental strategies and organisational innovation' by employers in response to the transforming but immature labour laws (Gallagher, Lee & Kuruvilla, 2011, p14) have effectively fragmented the Chinese employment practices, inevitably brewing employment inequalities and irregularities. Gallagher, Lee and Kuruvilla (2011) refer to this phenomenon as the informalisation of employment in China, a 'downward slide' of transformation (p4). While Chinese workers have been experiencing rapid and significant employment transitions throughout the ongoing transformation, the impact on their perceptions of employment relationships has not been investigated in depth. A promising concept in light of the transition of work and organisation is the psychological contract that 'neatly captures the spirit of the times' (Guest, 1998, p649; Sparrow & Cooper, 1999; Shore et al., 2004; Rousseau, 1995).

1.3 Research Rationale and Aim

Research on the psychological contract (PC) in China provides a rich opportunity to

explore the often taken-for-granted understandings of Chinese workers regarding traditional and emerging employment arrangements.

Hornung & Rousseau (2012, p326)

This study is a response to Hornung and Rousseau's (2012) recent call for in-depth psychological contract research into the employment experiences of Chinese workers. Its overarching aim is to explore Chinese workers' own accounts of implicit deals at work. The rationale for this line of research is twofold. First of all, the employment transformation in China has resulted in many drastic changes in its labour structure and world of work. While these changes are significant and empirically interesting, they have not been reflected in the systematic studies of psychological contracts in China. Secondly, existing psychological contract research in China has assumed the cross-cultural invariance, which Hornung and Rousseau (2012) doubt 'should theoretically be assumed in the first place' (p332).

There are several angles to understand Hornung and Rousseau's (2012) cautionary stance on the 'taken-for-granted understandings' of Chinese workers' psychological contracts. Firstly, differences in national cultures are believed to impact on psychological contracts (e.g., Sparrow, 1998) and psychological contract outcomes (e.g., Arshad, 2016). For example, Thomas et al. (2010) mapped out four distinctive types of psychological contracts according to different national cultures, namely, custodial (China), exploitive (France), communitarian (Norway), and instrumental (Canada)

psychological contracts. Secondly, social contexts, such as legal and normative practices, play a significant role in shaping psychological contracts (e.g., Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). From this viewpoint, China presents a unique social context of employment arrangements, which ‘provides a rich opportunity to explore’ potentially missed out theoretical insights. Related to this, not only is the Chinese social context highly contrasting to the West, but it is also dynamic and transforming. Considering their social and dynamic nature (Rousseau, 2011), there is a risk to assume psychological contracts as empirically static phenomena. At the very least, after the two recent major developments of Chinese labour laws (2008; 2013), there is a need for some re-examination of the ‘generalisability’ of the concept in China (see Hui, Lee & Rousseau, 2004). Taken together, it is not surprising that Hornung and Rousseau (2012) conclude their recent review of the literature with a remark that ‘it seems questionable whether cross-cultural invariance can be demonstrated’ by the empirical research evidence. As a result, these authors suspected that ‘a vital early step’ in theory developments might have been skipped in the Chinese contexts (ibid, p339).

Before reviewing the literature, several brief notes are in order. First, to achieve the research aim, a qualitative methodology is adopted for the purpose of in-depth exploration. Although there have been several studies on the psychological contract in China, the overall research evidence suggests that there may be significant theoretical insights being overshadowed by the predominant quantitative approach (see Chapter 2). This observation is confirmed by Hornung and Rousseau (2012), who recommend inductive and qualitative research in the Chinese contexts to study workers’

employment experiences in their own words. Second, while this study is set out in some distinct cultural and employment settings, it must be stressed that both ‘contextualisation’ (see Tsui, 2012) and theorisation of culture’s role in the psychological contract (see Sparrow, 1998) are beyond the primary scope of this thesis. Instead, it stands in line with Campbell (1990) and Whetten (2008) on the claim that contexts may be critical boundary conditions for theories. Consequently, this study sheds the first light on the empirical effects of the psychological contract’s boundary conditions (e.g., Rousseau, 2000a) by exploring the rich opportunity in the diversity of traditional and emerging employment arrangements in China. Following on from this, it is the first study that extends empirical support to the critics of the widely assumed universal applicability of the psychological contract (e.g., Arnold, 1996). While it is not the purpose of this thesis to confirm or predict, it contributes to the existing knowledge – as the first close examination of Chinese workers’ own accounts on their employment beliefs – by its contextual novelty and empirical richness that the findings reveal as well as by the inspired profound theoretical discussions (see Hornung and Rousseau, 2012, p339). It therefore enriches our practical understandings of the subjective ‘realities’ of workers from a wide range of employment settings in China, as well as opens a window for some alternative routes in developing psychological contract theories. Accordingly, this study investigates the local meanings of psychological contracts in the Chinese context by asking four research questions, respectively relating to Chinese workers’ interpretations and perceptions of (1) ‘obligation’, (2) ‘promise’, (3) ‘the other party’ and (4) implicit terms, in their employment relationships. I will now review the appropriate literature to specify, explain and underpin these research questions.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

The very construct of a contract in China, and the related notions such as PC (psychological contract), is a cultural import, providing a lens to study cultural continuance, boundaries, adaptation, local meanings and global features.

Hornung & Rousseau (2012, p326)

The aim of this research is to study the local meanings of the very notion of psychological contracts in China. To achieve this, the purpose of this chapter is to inform research questions mainly from the following literature: some key components of psychological contracts, and the existing research in China. I begin with a historical overview of the concept.

2.1 Historical Overview

This section provides a narrative account of the conceptual development of the psychological contract. It compares and contrasts some important definitions of the concept in order to clarify the adopted definition of this study. This is done in considerable detail because the psychological contract has been defined variedly in the contemporary literature (e.g., cf. Rousseau, 1989; 1995; 2001). Hornung and Rousseau (2012) recently explain it, in plain words, as ‘how an employee understands his or her relationship with a company or a boss (and vice versa)’ (p326). As I will show, this understanding has shifted significantly from its original conception (Argyris, 1960) and

noticeably from Rousseau's (1989) seminal definition. Because this study has a primary focus on the local meanings of psychological contracts, it is deemed necessary to present the reader the definitional developments with adequate details. I begin with the early research and then focus on more contemporary developments.

2.1.1 Early Research

Argyris (1960) was the first to apply the 'contract' metaphor to an observed implicit understanding between foremen and workers:

Since the foremen realize the employees in this system will tend to produce optimally under passive leadership, and since the employees agree, a relationship may be hypothesized to evolve between the employees and the foremen which might be called the 'psychological work contract'. The employee will maintain the high production, low grievances etc., if the foremen guarantee and respect the norms of the employees' informal culture. (p97).

The initial conception of the psychological contract gave an emphasis on 'a relationship...between the employees and the foremen' (Argyris, 1960; p97). It is implied that the psychological contract at work was used to understand employment relationships. Only a handful of other scholars and practitioners studied psychological contracts prior to Rousseau's (1989) seminal work (see p21). Some of the definitions are listed in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Early Definitions of the Psychological Contract

Scholars	Definitions
<i>Levinson et al., 1962, p21</i>	<i>A series of mutual expectations of which the parties to the relationship may not themselves be dimly aware but which nonetheless govern their relationship to each other</i>
<i>Schein, 1965, p11</i>	<i>The individual has a variety of expectations of the organization and that the organization has a variety of expectations of him (sic). These expectations not only cover how much work is to be performed for how much pay, but also involve the whole pattern of rights, privileges and obligations between worker and organizations.</i>
<i>Kotter, 1973, p14</i>	<i>An implicit contract between an individual and his (sic) organization which specifies what each expect to give and receive from each other in their relationship.</i>
<i>Dunahee & Wangler, 1974, p520</i>	<i>An evolving set of mutual expectations...(that) is not written into any identifiable formal agreement between employee and organization, yet it operates as powerfully as its legal counterpart.</i>
<i>Nicholson & Johns, 1985, p400</i>	<i>Assumptions about employment rights and obligations.</i>
<i>Baker, 1985, p37</i>	<i>Poorly explicated, misunderstood, and unwritten contracts...(based on) shared expectations.</i>

Although less integrated, these earlier definitions may be taken together to conceptualise the psychological contract as a concept to study work relationships. This strand of studies defined the psychological contract slightly differently from one to another, and generally studied the concept by taking into account both parties of psychological contracts (Roehling, 1997). The analytical and intellectual focus of the psychological contract was the relationship. As a result, it was loosely defined by a variety of terms that might describe the driving force of interactions between parties, such as expectations, obligations, rights, privilege, assumptions and needs.

The work of Levinson and colleague (Levinson et al, 1962) and Schein (1965; 1980) is particularly worth mentioning. Levinson et al (1962) differentiate expectations from

needs and desires because they are often based on past and current employment experiences, i.e., expectations are more realistic. They argue that such employment expectations, conscious or unconscious, may be duty-bounded (ibid). Conscious expectations are (almost) taken for granted while the unconscious can be inferred from patterns of employment relationships (ibid).

Schein (1965; 1980) suggest that expectations are drawn from ‘a host of... sources’ (Schein, 1980, p24). Schein (1965; 1980) provides the foundation for later elaborations on: 1) multiple sources of expectations, e.g., past experience, learning, inner needs and company documents and culture; 2) the dynamic nature of psychological contracts, e.g., its ratification and changes over time; 3) the evaluation of psychological contracts, i.e., contract measurement, fulfilment and violation; and, 4) implications for management and organisation. Although valuable, these early conceptualisations were broad but imprecise, lacking empirical guidance and operational consistencies (cf., Roehling, 1997).

2.1.2 Contemporary Research

Contemporary psychological contract research is mostly inspired by Rousseau (1989) who redefined the psychological contract as:

An individual's belief regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between the focal person and another party. Key issues here include the belief that a promise has been made and a consideration offered in exchange for it,

binding the parties to some set of reciprocal obligations (p123).

This has a clear restrictive boundary on subjectivity based on perceived promises; it became a feasible basis to empirically test her postulations (see Rousseau, 1989). Although ‘another party’ of the psychological contract is not defined, it was made clear that the “organization, as the other party in the relationship ...cannot in turn have a psychological contract with its members (because) organizations cannot ‘perceive’” (Rousseau, 1989, p126). Rousseau (1990) first carried out an empirical investigation of the reborn theory. Although her study validated the existence of psychological contracts, the psychological contract was somewhat differently defined as:

*...an individual's beliefs regarding reciprocal **obligations**. Beliefs become contractual when the individual believes that he or she owes the employer certain contributions in return for certain inducements (Rousseau, 1990, p390; emphasis added).*

In operationalising the concept, the ‘key issues’ of ‘promise made’ and ‘consideration offered in exchange for it’ (Rousseau, 1989, p123) are rather vaguely implied in this definition. There is still a clear emphasis on ‘beliefs’, albeit in a somehow arbitrary term as ‘obligations’. In augmenting her conceptualisation, Rousseau (1995) shortly elaborates her theory of the psychological contract that is defined as:

*Individual beliefs, **shaped by the organization**, regarding terms of an exchange*

agreement between the individual and their organization. (p9; emphasis added).

The emphasised issue is the source of psychological contracts, i.e., the organisation. In the same book, Rousseau (1995) also reclaims the conceptual significance of promise (see Section 2.3.4). In supporting Rousseau (1995), Morrison and Robinson (1997) conceptualised the violation model, wherein the psychological contract is defined as:

An employee's beliefs about the reciprocal obligations between that employee and his or her organization, where these obligations are based on perceived promises and are not necessarily recognised by agents of the organization (p229).

Morrison and Robinson (1997) reiterate that only 'obligations accompanied by the belief that a promise has been conveyed' by the organisation count for psychological contracts (p228). Putting it differently, 'perceived obligations arising from elsewhere, such as relationships pre-dating the current employer, or from an employee's moral values, are not part of the psychological contract' (Conway & Briner, 2005, p26). Although these clarifications set conceptual distinctions, Rousseau and Tijoriwala (1998) shortly provide the field with a simplistic definition in 'assessing psychological contracts' (p679) for a special issue of the Journal of Organizational Behavior:

*A psychological contract is a composite or **bundle of obligations** (p687; emphasis added).*

In the face of inconsistencies in operationalising the psychological contract, Rousseau (2001) made the first attempt to theoretically develop the concept from a cognitive perspective and argues that:

*Because employment exists in an institutional context (shaped by law, societal beliefs, occupations, etc.), psychological contracts are **schemas** shaped by multilevel factors, allowing the study of complex cognitive organizing (p525; emphasis added).*

In a recent publication, she (Rousseau, 2011) confirms this definitional emphasis that:

*A psychological contract is an individual's **system** of beliefs, based on commitments expressed or implied, regarding an exchange agreement with another (p191; emphasis added).*

While 'promise' seems relegated from the more recent psychological contract definition, it still occupies a significant role in the psychological contract theory: however defined, 'psychological contracts are promise-based beliefs' (Hui, Lee & Rousseau, 2004; p319). Nevertheless, empirical scholars continue to define the psychological contract in looser terms. In a recent study, Chambel and Alcover (2011) state that:

*The psychological contract is based on the **expectations** of workers in terms of the kind of exchange established between them and their employer (p117; emphasis*

added).

It is worth noting that the conceptual differences between promises and expectations have been well argued. Rousseau (1995) maintains that only expectations and obligations based on perceived promises are part of psychological contracts. Robinson and Rousseau (1994) argue for fundamental differences between expectations and promises as expectations are more general in nature. It is reasoned that promises are special cases of expectations (Rousseau & Parks, 1993) which are more specific in terms of what to anticipate and more likely to materialise (Conway & Briner, 2005). There are also meta-analyses evidence to suggest empirical differences between psychological contracts and expectations (cf., Zhao et al., 2007; Wanous et al., 1992).

Another frequently cited research is by Herriot and colleagues who compiled the most comprehensive list of psychological contract contents (Herriot, Manning & Kidd, 1997). It was based on an exploration of employees' and managers' perceptions on occasions where expectations had fallen short of (or exceeded) (ibid). Accordingly, Herriot and Pemberton (1997) define the psychological contract in terms of:

*The **perceptions** of both parties to the employment relationship, organization and individual, of the obligations implied in the relationship (p45; emphasis added).*

This definition highlights some fundamental characteristics of the psychological contract. First, it underscores the intellectual focus of 'perceptions' ('beliefs'), i.e., it is

how the participants construe their employment relationships that matters; or in Rousseau's (1989) words: psychological contracts are 'in the eye of the beholder' (p123). Relate to this, it reflects an intrinsic value of the psychological contract in that it captures the implicit aspect of the relationship. While the definition is also in accordance with Rousseau's (2011) recent recommendation of using 'obligation' to study psychological contracts in reconciling the diversity of operationalisations, it does not downplay the conceptual significance of schema based on which perceptions arise (Rousseau, 2001). It resonates with Hornung and Rousseau's (2012) recent 'plain explanation' of the psychological contract (see earlier), and seems a preferred definitional position (e.g., Guest & Conway, 2002; Guest, 2004). This definitional stance is therefore adopted for this study. To better fit the purpose of this research (see Anderson & Schalk, 1998) that emphasises the employees' perspective of the psychological contract, as well as set in line with Rousseau's most recent work (see Tomprou et al., 2015, p561), the working definition for this study is adapted as:

Psychological contracts refer to an employee's perceived obligations that govern how s/he understands the exchange arrangement implied in the employment relationship.

There are three central components in the above definition: a) it is about the individual perceptions of obligations (see p25); b) it involves parties of exchange agreements in an employment relationship (see p22); and c) it is implied (see 1st para, this page). Before elaborating on these components, the next section briefly summarises the theoretical developments in the literature.

2.2 Theoretical Fundamentals of the Psychological Contract

Three streams of research need to be reviewed to provide a comprehensive overview of the research field: psychological contract content, fulfilment, and formation stages. I will review these in turn.

2.2.1 Psychological Contract Content

Psychological contract contents are manifests of the reciprocal exchange items between the employee and the employer (Rousseau, 1995). Most widely adopted is the distinction between relational and transactional contents of psychological contracts, which 'reflects common patterns of agreements in employment regarding exchange of particular sets of resources' (Hornung & Rousseau, 2012, p327). This distinction specifically relates to Blau's (1964) social exchange theory that people engage in social interactions through economic and social exchanges. The transactional dimension reflects the economic exchange whereby employees perceive their employment relationships as based on narrow, well-specified, materialistic, quantifiable and/or short-term exchanges of typically quid pro quo obligations. On the other hand, the relational dimension reflects the social exchange whereby employees perceive their employment relationships as based on broader, less specified, symbolic, socio-emotional, open-ended and/or long-term exchanges of obligations. Rousseau (1990) first empirically validated this distinction by showing these dimensions (Table 2.2). Transactional and relational dimensions may reside in a continuum of transactional and relational contract terms (see Rousseau, 1995). Other scholars have carried on this line of research and developed further terminologies to categorise contents (e.g.,

Rousseau & Parks, 1993; Bunderson, 2001; McInnis, Meyer & Feldman, 2009; Scheel & Mohr, 2013). Parks, Kidder and Gallagher (1998) proposed the most comprehensive conceptual framework to study nonstandard workers, though the empirical validity remains uncertain (e.g., De Cuyper & De Witte, 2008; McInnis, Meyer & Feldman, 2009).

Table 2.2 Typical Transactional and Relational Contract Terms

Dimensions	Typical Contract Terms
Transactional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Specific economic conditions (e.g., wage rate) as primary incentive - Limited personal involvement in the job (e.g., working relatively few hours/low emotional investment) - Closed-ended time frame (e.g., seasonal employment, 2- to 3 years on the job at most) - Commitments limited to well-specified conditions (e.g., union contracts) - Little flexibility (change requires renegotiation of contract) - Use of existing skills (no development) - Unambiguous terms readily understood by outsiders
Relational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emotional involvement as well as economic exchange (e.g., personal support, concern for family well-being) - Whole person relations (e.g., growth, development) - Open-ended time frames (i.e., indefinitely) - Both written and unwritten terms (e.g., terms emerged over time) - Dynamic and subject to change during the life of the contract - Pervasive conditions (e.g., affects personal and family life) - Subjective and implicitly understood (i.e., conditions difficult for third party to understand)

Source: Adapted from Rousseau (1995).

The establishment of psychological contract contents made it possible to examine ‘what happens when ... (the psychological contract) is violated’ to understand how it works (Rousseau, 1989, p128). The fulfilment of the psychological contract is the matter to which I now turn.

2.2.2 Psychological Contract Fulfilment

The degree of fulfilment experienced by the contract parties (or ‘the employee’ for the present study) is a critical issue in the psychological contract theory. Contract fulfilment is judged by the employee on the basis of whether reciprocal obligations have been lived up to (Lee et al., 2011). Employees construe their employment relationships as being fulfilled, over-fulfilled and unfulfilled/breach. A major strand of research in this light has been psychological contract breach (cf. Conway & Briner, 2009).

Robinson and Rousseau (1994) first empirically assessed the psychological contract fulfilment and claimed that ‘violating the psychological contract... (is) the norm’ (p245). Their longitudinal study concluded that breach resulted in higher turnover, lower trust, reduced satisfaction and higher intention to quit (ibid). These findings were consistent with the results of a meta-analysis which found that, in general, breaches of relational exchanges elicit stronger negative reactions than the transactional. (Zhao et al., 2007). These outcomes were found considerably stronger than that of unmet expectations (Wanous et al., 1992) and slightly weaker than that of fairness (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; also see Robinson, 1996). Fairness and breach were found to have similar effects on sickness behaviours, organisational commitment and perceived performance whilst breach had a stronger impact on job satisfaction and intention to leave (Guest, Isaksson & De Witte, 2010; also see Cassar & Buttigieg, 2015).

Research suggests that the antecedents of breach include (perceived) deliberate *reneging* by employers, *incongruence* in perceptions between employers and employees and

disruption at work (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Cassar, Buttigieg & Briner, 2013). Cassar and Briner's (2005) study concluded five components of breach, including delay, magnitude, different type or form of reward, inequity and reciprocal imbalance. They explain that *delay* refers to a situation that the delivery of promise is later than expected; *magnitude* is a breach when the fulfilment of an obligation is less than promised; *different type or form of reward* refers to where the promised and delivered rewards are in different types or forms; *inequity* occurs where the employee perceives s/he has received less than or different from that of the comparable others; and, *reciprocal imbalance* is a component of breach where the employee believes that their inputs are greater than the output from the employment exchange with the employer (ibid). This line of inquiry is primarily studied by Cassar and colleagues (Cassar & Briner, 2005; Cassar, Buttigieg & Briner, 2013; Cassar, Briner & Buttigieg, 2016); more scholarly attention has been focused on the outcomes of breach (e.g., Rodwell & Ellershaw, 2015; Clinton & Guest, 2013; Si, Wei & Li, 2008; Bao, et al., 2011; Restubog, Bordia & Tang, 2007; Hermida & Luchman, 2013; Chin & Hung, 2013; Sayers, et al., 2011; also see Conway & Briner, 2005; 2009).

Notwithstanding a great number of studies, Conway and Briner (2002) argued that 'many previous studies...have been atheoretical in design' (p281) and its research results were inconsistent and inconclusive (Conway & Briner, 2005; 2009). In addition, critics question its added value compared to similar constructs (Arnold, 1996; Guest, 1998; Conway & Briner, 2005). Indeed, the workings of breach are speculative and usually involve conceptually overlapping concepts, such as Vroom's (1964) expectancy

theory (see Robinson, 1996), Adams' (1965) equity theory (see Robinson, Kraatz & Rousseau, 1994); Locke's (1968) goal-setting theory (see Conway & Briner, 2002a), and trust (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995; see Clinton & Guest, 2013).

To develop theoretical understanding, Morrison and Robinson (1997) distinguish violation from breach, referring to breach as a cognitive awareness of the discrepancy between what is promised and delivered, whereas violation a 'mental state of readiness for action' resulted from breach (p231). They highlight the emotional outcomes of the psychological contract breach and hypothesise that behavioural outcomes are often a result of extreme emotions from breach, such as anger and feeling of betrayal (ibid). Empirically, the violation construct has also been validated (Robinson & Morrison, 2000; Cassar & Briner, 2011). A meta-analysis of the psychological contract outcomes concluded that violation accounted for 10 percent more than breach for outcomes on a correlation index (Zhao et al., 2007).

From a different viewpoint, Guest (1998) first conceptualised a framework of the state of the psychological contract to demonstrate the complex workings of the psychological contract, proposing that its outcomes are through a psychological state after breach instead of the perceived breach *per se*. Guest (2004) further maps out the attitudinal and behavioural outcomes of the psychological contract. The former includes organisational commitment, work satisfaction, work-life balance, stress, motivation and job-security, while the latter includes attendance, intention to stay/quit, job performance and organisational citizenship behaviours. Guest's (1998; 2004; 2004a) approach has yet to

be widely recognised outside a close circle of scholars, mostly from the UK (likely also Europe); this is perhaps because the concept is loosely defined as the ‘extent to which the contract has been met or breached and also (measured) through the indicators of trust and fairness’ (Guest & Conway, 2002, p25; Guest, 1998; Guest, 2004a). The empirical research on the state of the psychological contract was initially commissioned by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) to focus on British employees’ well-being (for an overview, see Guest & Clinton, 2005). Research evidence shows relatively constant relationships between the state of the psychological contract and certain outcomes such as intention to leave, sickness behaviours and job satisfaction, albeit variations exist across contexts (cf., Guest & Conway, 1998; 1999; 2005; Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Clinton and Guest, 2013; Guest, Isaksson & De Witte, 2010).

While these theoretical developments set foundations for the psychological contract research, they do not address the process of psychological contracting, to which I will now turn.

2.2.3 Psychological Contracting Stages

Having incorporated five employment phases of pre-employment, recruitment, earlier socialisation, later experiences and the psychological contract evaluation (Rousseau, 2001), Shore et al (2004) suggests a three-stage-process, i.e., the anticipatory, encounter and accommodate stages.

Anticipatory psychological contracts are incomplete and unstable (Shore et al., 2004), hence rely heavily on the recruitment and selection process to come into an initial formation (Shore & Tetrick, 1994). Once mutuality on an exchange is thought to be reached, the ratification of psychological contracts is achieved (Schein, 1978). In the encounter stage (Shore et al., 2004), newly hired employees compare actual situations with expectations and begin to acquire more informed and stable psychological contracts (Louis, 1980; De Vos, Buyens & Schalk, 2003). The relatively durable and resistant-to-change psychological contracts may be revised according to unexpected workplace occurrences (Rousseau, 1995) in the accommodate stage (Shore et al., 2004), though this tends to be slow and gradual (Rousseau, 2001). More recent research has made preliminary attempt to explain psychological contract formation from the schema perspective (Sherman & Morley, 2015).

From an empirical perspective, research shows elusive temporal divisions of these stages. De Vos and Freese's (2011) study on organisational entry suggests that the first three months set a temporal divide (also see Saks & Ashforth, 1997), while the first three weeks seem most critical for the sense-making of later events. On the other hand, De Vos, Buyens and Schalk (2003) collected data at 2 weeks, 3 months, 6 months and 12 months after entry and concluded 'limited support for the (existing) idea' (p537) with findings 'contrary to...expectations' (p554). In general, the first year of employment seems critical to psychological contracts formation (Thomas & Anderson, 1998; De Vos, Buyens & Schalk, 2003; Tekleab, Orvis & Taylor, 2013), although the joining-up process wherein psychological contracts develop might take at least 18 months upon

joining the organisation (Kotter, 1973).

While making theoretical progresses, these fundamentals of psychological contract content, fulfilment and formation stages tend to overlook the cultural impact on the theory. This is questionable not only because the theoretical origins of the concept explicitly acknowledge the ‘rule of justice is a social norm’ in the social exchange (Blau, 1964, p196) and the ‘norm (of reciprocity) functions differently in some degree in different *cultures*’ (Gouldner, 1906, p171; original emphasis), but also that the cross-national research shows the cross-cultural invariant approach is questionable (e.g., Hornung & Rousseau, 2012; see Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). To understand the potential influences of culture, the following sections further review literature on three key components of psychological contracts as identified earlier: individual perceptions of obligations, parties to the contract, and the implicit nature of the psychological contract.

2.3 Perceptions of Obligations

In its essence, psychological contracts take the form of employment perceptions based on schemas developed over time (Rousseau, 2001). In turn, the following subsections reviews literature on schema and socio-cultural influences on schema and schema-based employment obligations.

2.3.1 Psychological Contracts as Schemas

The notion of schema suggests that people have mental models as simplistic representations of the complex world. The development of schema is retrospective from

an accumulation of past experiences with a prospective purpose to guide organisations of future incoming information (Rousseau, 2001). The schema research is largely rooted in clinical and cognitive psychology. From the psychological contract perspective, four features of schemas are particularly relevant.

Firstly, there may be shared and idiosyncratic elements of psychological contracts. Long-standing company practices and explicit promises lead to normative beliefs (i.e., normative contracts) amongst employees over time (Nicholson & Johns, 1985; Rousseau, 2001). On the other hand, idiosyncratic psychological contracts may result from how individuals value and construe promises made by the organisation (Rousseau, 1995) as well as depend on individual abilities to negotiate idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) with the employer (Rousseau, 2005; Hornung, Rousseau & Glaser, 2009). The higher (more collective) contracts influence the lower levels through the sharing of fundamental assumptions (e.g., meaning of family), values (e.g., meaning of service), behavioural norms (e.g., avoid conflict), patterns of behaviours (e.g., casual wearing on Fridays) and artefacts (e.g., company slogan) (Rousseau, 1995). The assimilation amongst organisational members may also be understood by Schneider's (1987) Selection-Adaptation-Attrition model whereby organisations often hire people who fit the corporate culture (Selection) and those who initially do not fit may gradually change (Adaptation) or eventually leave (Attrition).

Secondly, schemas differ in the levels of complexity by connections of vertical and horizontal structures (Rousseau, 2001). Vertical structures refer to the levels of

abstractions while the horizontal refer to the degree of differentiations of cognitions at any given level. The level of complexity depends on the number of cognitive beliefs and the linkages amongst them. In Rousseau's (2001, p516) illustration of a hypothetical professional-school 'professor' schema, there are two highest levels of abstractions (i.e., academic reputation and psychological success) and four lowest levels of beliefs (i.e., teaching, research, professional outreach and university service). Between these, concepts (i.e., doctoral student development, money, executive education, organisational citizenship) are rather scattered than strictly organised vertically/horizontally while having linkages cross-structurally. Therefore, schemas are net-structured cognitive models representing complex networks of beliefs, meanings, concepts and abstractions.

Related to this, schemas may be embryonic or stereotypical depending on the levels of completeness and stability. The conceptual power of a schema lies in its capability to provide automaticity in information organising that is gradually developed and strengthened with schema stabilisation (Shuell, 1990). Stability is achieved by reaching schema completeness where the new information seems to confirm existing beliefs (Rousseau, 2001). This stabilising process fine-tunes schemas by improving their accuracy based on feedback from the environment over time (Rumelhart & Norman, 1978).

For example, an expert and a novice may differ in their schemas in terms of complexity and/or stability (Rousseau, 2001). An employee who is expert in knowledge about his/her organisation may have more complex linkages among more cognitive elements

in his/her schema of employment whereas a new graduate may have fewer linkages and cognitive beliefs about employment relationships as s/he enters a new organisation. In this scenario, the old employee probably has a relatively stable employment schema compared to the new graduate.

However, once the schema reaches stability, it tends to resist change (Crocker, Fiske & Taylor, 1984). This is because changing the schema requires motivation and cognitive effort (Rumelhart & Norman, 1978). It is also because an established schema, usually functional for the perceiver, tends to automatically guide the information organising and processing based on the existing schema (Rousseau, 2001). The schema's information processing function is especially related to the interpretative nature of the psychological contract.

Finally, schemas serve an inferential function to help employees understand and interpret the happenings at work. This is important in particular when there is incomplete information. Schemas facilitate people to fill in the blanks of knowledge about an event or situation by providing likely cues to interpret the social context (Lee et al., 2011). For example, the new hires usually know limited details about their roles and duties in the organisation. Their pre-existing schemas indicate their initial understanding of the employment relationship and help them gauge what they may expect from the employer and what they need to provide in return (Rousseau, 2001). As they start to socialise, they get access to different sources of information (e.g., supervisors and co-workers; Ho & Levesque, 2005), though varied in quality and

credibility, that may either adapt or reinforce their existing schemas in order to make more accurate predictions about future actions (Rousseau, 2001). For the interest of this study, I will now focus on the socio-cultural influences on schema.

2.3.2 Socio-cultural Influences on Schemas and Schema-based Obligations

From the viewpoint of culture, Sparrow (1996) suggests that there are cultural effects on cognitive bias (e.g., locus of control and fatalism) and motivational schema foci (e.g., meaningfulness of work, security, achievement, recognition, advancement, and, life and personal goals). For example, career anchor, a shaping factor for the psychological contract (see Tietze & Nadin, 2011), is prone to influences from cultural values (Schein, 1984). This is particularly so in light of the shifting of focus toward the subjective career (Collin & Watts, 1996) that may be socially constructed (Savickas, 2013) and culturally casted (Li & Ngo, 2015) and thus differs cross-nationally (Froese, Jommersbach & Klautzsch, 2013; Moriano, et al., 2012). Similarly, factors such as identities and ideologies are related to social norms and cultural values (Rousseau, 1995; 2001; 2011). In addition, gender differences in family roles and social identities are also claimed to be culturally defined (Gergen & Davis, 2013). These factors, in turn, have significant impacts on individual schemas on employment obligations (cf., Hallier & Forbes, 2004; Seeck & Parzefall, 2008; Coyle-Shapiro & Neuman, 2004; Thompson & Bunderson, 2003). For example, females were found to feel more obliged to make sacrifices for the organisation than males (Roehling, 2008).

On societal influences, Rousseau and Schalk (2000) suggest three sets of important

factors: law, government, and civil society and social institutions. Law is a powerful determinant of the terms of psychological contracts for what it ‘permits, forbids or requires’ (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000, p19). Government plays a key role mainly because of their responsibility of creating and regulating the capital and labour markets. Civil society and social institutions influence cultural and other norms. In a recent review, Rousseau (2011) comments on the incongruence between social norms (or ‘social contracts’; p214) and legislations on employment security, demonstrating the strength of social institutions of ‘good faith and fair dealing’ can overtake ‘existing law’ (p214). Similarly, in the UK, nationwide surveys showed that the majority of workers did not perceive significant threats to job security (Guest & Clinton, 2005), despite the emergence of zero hours contracts (see Fleetwood, 2007).

From another theoretical viewpoint, psychological contracts as schemas are ‘acquired through learning and held in memory’ (Rousseau, 2011, p194). Simply put, schemas are ‘learned’ through experiences (e.g., in a given national context). From this vantage point, not only do cultures impact on psychological contracts, they also influence learning styles (Hayes & Allinson, 1988), i.e., preferred ways of information processing and gaining knowledge (Armstrong, Cools & Sadler-Smith, 2012; Armstrong & Mahmud, 2008) as a result of the feedback from the environment (Kolb & Kolb, 2012). Not surprisingly, learning styles are also argued to be prone to cultural influences (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2007).

The socio-cultural influences on obligations have a primary influence on the

operationalisation of the psychological contract. In light of the operational/definitional diversity (see Section 2.1.2; also see Bankins, 2014), Rousseau (2011) recently argued ‘for using obligations in research... particularly with respect to the employer’s side of an individual worker’s psychological contract’ (pp209-210). Theoretically, this case for obligations has its roots in the social exchange (Blau, 1964) and reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), as well as the modern concept of individual wherein freedom and responsibility hold a central role (Seeck & Parzefall, 2008). This does not mean, however, that all schemas based obligations are psychological contracts. Rousseau and Schalk (2000) maintain that ‘general mega-obligations or socially derived duty’ need to be differentiated from psychological contracts, although they also acknowledge that it is difficult to tease out such differentiations (p16). The difficulty gives rise to operationalising the psychological contract, especially in different societal contexts.

Variable societal influences both impose *general* obligations in the employment relationship and affect *individual* schemas of specific employment obligations. While recognising that ‘these effects cannot be completely separated’, Rousseau & Schalk (2000) urge that ‘we must try to tease out’ individually created obligations as well as societal meta-obligations in the employment relationship (pp16-17). While largely neglected, this advice is of crucial importance to research because a) Rousseau’s (2011) latest advice that ‘obligation’ is a preferred terminology in assessing the psychological contract seems to rely on the assumption that ‘obligations’ are individually created (rather than socially imposed); this is probably related to b) the first empirical validation of concept. In validating the psychological contract, Rousseau (1990) conducted a study,

measuring psychological contracts in a way that (p393):

Recruits were asked to indicate what they believed to be their obligations to the particular employer whose job offer they had accepted, the employer's obligations to them, and any stipulations made by their future employer during recruitment. The measure designed to tap terms of the employee's psychological content involves expectations of what the employee feels she or he owes and is owed in turn by the organization. This assessment is phrased in terms of obligations in the sense that obligations bind an actor 'by promise or contract' to a course of action (Oxford English Dictionary 1971).

Note that, while plausible, Rousseau's (1990) sole reasoning for phrasing her psychological contract assessment in terms of obligations was based on a single entry of the Oxford Dictionary (1971). The differentiation between individually created and socially imposed obligations was not theoretically or empirically discussed in that paper (Rousseau, 1990). Yet, not only does it 'justify a number of hypothesized features of psychological contracts...and suggest that psychological contract is a construct relevant to employment...' (Rousseau, 1990, p398), but also its measure has become one of the frequently used/referenced in the later empirical research (e.g., Coyle-Shapiro & Neuman, 2004; Roehling, 2008). The implicit assumption that 'owed obligations' were all individually created might be particularly risky because its measure reflected somewhat broad categories of employment obligations, in that:

Employer obligations were assessed...by asking recruits to what extent they believed the particular employer whose job offer they had accepted obligated or owed them: Promotion; high pay; pay based on current level of performance; training; long-term job security; career development; support with personal problems.... (While) their obligations to that employer included: Working extra hours; loyalty; volunteering to do non-required tasks on the job; advance notice if taking a job elsewhere; willingness to accept a transfer; refusal to support the employer's competitors; protection of proprietary information; spending a minimum of two years in the organization (Rousseau, 1990; p394).

There seem to be two difficulties regarding these broad 'obligations' in the employment relationship to assess psychological contracts: a) it is hard to determine whether they are socially imposed; and b) they tend to be culturally varied and thus unlikely to be cross-culturally invariant to support the commonly adopted universal approach in other cultures (e.g., cf., Hornung & Rousseau, 2012). For example, promotion (according to seniority) and long-term job security might rather be more socially imposed than individually perceived (toward a *particular* employer) in Japan, or in some sections in India (see Shah, 2000), France (see Cadin, 2000) and China. Even in the USA, it has been well documented and argued that job security is a social norm/public belief even when the law permits termination at will (see Forbes & Jones, 1986; Rousseau & Schalk, 2000; Rousseau, 2011). On the other hand, 'pay based on current performance' may be more relevant to individualist cultures (e.g., the USA) than collectivist cultures (e.g., China).

Therefore, the ignorance of the empirical implications of using broad employment obligations to assess psychological contracts seems unadvisable. This is especially so because our knowledge of the psychological contract is largely based on quantitative research, which is heavily measurement-dependent. There is a need to investigate how employees interpret ‘obligations’ in the employment relationship in a given societal context (e.g., see Cassar & Briner, 2009). Since there has been no such empirical attempt found in the existing literature in China, the first research question for this study is:

Research Question 1: How do Chinese workers interpret ‘obligations’ in the employment context?

Although empirically scarce, there have been several theoretical endeavours to distinguish employment obligations that specifically pertain to psychological contracts. These are based on the understanding of promise.

2.3.3 Promise-based Psychological Contracts

The contemporary psychological contract literature is largely promise-based (cf., Bankins, 2014). Although it is advised to use ‘obligation’ to operationalise the psychological contract, Rousseau (2001) maintains that such obligations are essentially promise-generated.

Not every promise, however, results in psychological contract obligations. Rousseau

(1995) defines four types of promises: 1) idle promises (not paid serious attention to); 2) credible promises (believed but may not be relied upon); 3) unattended-to promises (not followed through under certain circumstances); and, 4) relied-upon promises (relied upon for commitment). In theory, a credible promise would only become contractual if the recipient followed it through and a relied-upon promise *may* constitute a psychological contract in that a (relied-upon) ‘promise...(that) does no harm’ is not contractual (Rousseau, 1995, p17). To further clarify, Rousseau (1995) explains that an unattended-to promise might result in disappointment and dissatisfaction but *not* a breach of contract.

A central idea to a psychological contract promise is the concept of ‘reliance losses’ – only a broken promise that results in ‘behavioural losses’ counts as a breach. For example, ‘if you promise to sell me your car and I give you a check for the asking price, ...(then) you change your mind but refund my money in full, you have made good on our contract’ (Rousseau, 1995, p18). In other words, to form a (psychological) contract, there must be ‘a consideration offered in exchange for it’ (Rousseau, 1989, p123); to claim a breach, the recipient must have followed through a promise *by action* due to the reliance on the promise (Rousseau, 1995). This promise, though, may be verbal or implied (Rousseau, 2001).

Implied promises, as opposed to ‘promises conveyed in words’, refer to ‘promises conveyed through action’ (Rousseau, 2001; p525). Promises in words, spoken or written, are verbal promises that signal intent for agreements, pledges, commitments, warranties

and guarantees. Promises through action may be implied/interpreted by administrative signals, such as benefits packages and organisational practices (e.g., recruitment and selection). Expressed or implied, Rousseau (2001) argues that:

Promises are a fundamental unit in virtually all typologies of speech (Bernicot & Laval, 1996) and a basic building block of inter-personal relations (Rubin & Lewicki, 1973) and cooperation with groups (Dawes, van de Kragt, & Orbell, 1998). They have been investigated variously as pragmatic linguistic units, as mental models of obligation, and as social judgments regarding appropriate conduct (Politzer & Nguyen-Xuan, 1992)...Without promises, employment relationships as we know them could not exist (p525).

Rousseau (2001) further suggests several considerations at a theoretical level to understand promises (largely) based on speech acts. Speech acts research refers to literature of analysing the basic units in written or spoken communication. Rousseau (1995; 2001) describes two forms of promises that have particular relevance to speech acts: warranties (i.e., expressions of fact) are assertive speech and commissive promises (i.e., verbal statements committing the speaker to future actions) are commissive speech. However, the word 'promise' is not required for the expression of future commitments. For example, behavioural research in clinical science indicates that 'the provision of a specific goal is exactly one of the critical components defining a formal contract' (Kanfer et al., 1974; p617). The 'goal' is a statement of promise acting as a performance criterion (Locke et al., 1981) in light of an individuals' accountability (Rousseau, 2001).

On the other hand, actual usage of 'promise' does not sufficiently commit the speaker to a contract. Only through the effective communication and exchange of promises, both parties' behaviours are bound for the achievements of desired outcomes. Communicated promises are self-regulating for several reasons (Rousseau, 1995; pp24-26). For example, promise-keeping helps to maintain self-image and esteem while avoiding potential reliance losses; it promotes self-acceptance of responsibility and imagery of future; and, it is required by social norms and reputations or motivated by incentives. Therefore, promissory psychological contracts are self-regulating mechanisms that motivate employees to act and perform toward agreed upon actions and outcomes (Rousseau, 2001).

However, promises are inherently incomplete due to cognitive limitations that means it is unlikely (and/or may not be advantageous) to specify all terms and conditions in advance (Rousseau, 2001). To avoid impasse over potential future disputes due to contingencies, promise-based agreements may imply or indicate both parties' willingness to resolve any left out issues in future as events unfold (Rousseau, 2001). When there has been an existing relationship between parties, the incompleteness of promises may even be deliberately incorporated into agreements due to trust implications and relational contract properties (Rousseau, 2001). This may partially be shown in that relational psychological contracts seem more vulnerable for perceived breach/violations (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Guest, Isaksson & De Witte, 2010).

One explanation for this tendency is the cognitive bias in presuming a mutual agreement between parties, especially when a relationship pre-exists. The false consensus is related to the self-ego (Turk & Salovey, 1985) that makes people tend to believe that a majority of others think alike. Unrealistic optimism leads to underestimate risks or future costs (Eisenberg, 1995). Some cognitive bias can be cultural. For example, the between-group bias was especially referred to in the research in China (e.g., Hui, Lee & Rousseau, 2004). Indeed, Rousseau and Schalk (2000) stress that the exchange of promises is socio-culturally bound.

As indicated earlier, the importance of promise lies in its signalling the future intent of the promisor. Regardless of the source of such promises (e.g., words, deeds or other communication), psychological contract promises need to signify the credibility of the future intent. Credible signals rely on the trustworthiness of the source and the promisor within a given employment relationship, which is in turn subject to socio-cultural influences '*within a society*' (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000, p284; original emphasis). For example, Smith (2002) suggests that national culture has an impact on the preferred frames of reference in decision-making, indicating cross-national differences in the perceived trustworthiness of the source of information. National culture also affects the authority of the organisational practices by the preferences of the degree of decentralisation of HRM and efficiency of performance management, which in turn shape the credibility of contractors at different levels of organisational hierarchies (Sparrow, 1998).

Rousseau and Schalk (2000) further suggest that the trustworthiness of specific employment promises may differ in countries where legal systems tend to be different in levels of enforcements of employment conditions. Different sanctions for violating employment conditions influence the level of tolerance for unfulfilled/under-fulfilled employment promises, which may in part affect the meaning of promise-keeping across societies. However, Rousseau and Schalk (2000) maintain that such sanctions are not only legally based, but also culturally shaped. Cultural factors come into play when the negative consequences, i.e., reliance losses, are construed. While the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) suggests a universal tendency of avoiding harming the party who has trusted and positively reciprocated, how 'harm' is evaluated varies across-nationally in light of the aversive consequences of contract breach (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000).

A particularly important cross-cultural difference in light of psychological contract research is the very cultural meaning of promise. Rousseau and Schalk (2000, p6) suggest that 'a promise means different things' in different cultures influenced by uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2010). A promise in a high uncertainty avoidance culture (e.g., Japanese) may mean 'a promise to do' while in low uncertainty avoidance culture (e.g., American) may imply 'a promise...simply to *try*' (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000, p6; original emphases). In Judaism, Krausz (2000) observes that keeping a promise is almost religiously imperative since honesty and fairness are values dictated by God.

Irrespective of the cultural variability of its meaning, promise occupies a central position in the contemporary psychological contract theory. It is argued to be important for the psychological contract conceptual distinctiveness (Conway & Briner, 2005), extra utility (Anderson & Schalk, 1998) and construct clarity (Shore, 2002) for several reasons. Firstly, promise-delivery involves ethical imperatives, a stronger drive, thus an easier formation of the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). Related to this, there is 'a deeper emotional component to the experience of' breach (Rousseau, 1989, p127). Partially as a result of this, a breach of promise-based psychological contract arouses stronger urges to remedy actual behavioural losses (i.e., reliance losses) and rectify the emotional unrest. Taken together, a promise is not just more than a general expectation but also above the issue of fairness (Rousseau, 1989) – it is conceived as a shaper construct to govern behaviours.

It is curious, then, that empirical psychological contract results have been considerably inconsistent and inconclusive (Conway & Briner, 2009). A potential reason for this is the inconsistent operationalisations of the concept (cf., Bankins, 2014; also see earlier). On this point, Roehling (2008) investigated alternative psychological contract operationalisations, i.e., expectation, obligation and promise. He found mixed support for these alternatives that were not fully interchangeable. For example, there were significant differences across expectation, obligation and promise in the correlations involving trust, education and work centrality.

On a closer look, however, Roehling's (2008) findings give rise to the question of what

'promise' is really about, or perhaps, if it is 'much to do about nothing' (p261): on none of the combinations of external criteria and psychological contract contents did promise yield a stronger correlation than obligation. Theoretically, the notion of promise is claimed to be problematic (Bankins, 2010); empirically, Montes and Zweig (2009) found promises played 'a negligible role in predicting feelings of violation and behavioural intentions' (p1243). While this seems to be in line with Rousseau's (2011) recommendation of operationalising the concept by obligation, it begs the question of what would the research operationalised by promise, which dominates the existing literature (see Bankins, 2014), tell us? Or rather, what would we really know about the psychological contract?

These are challenging issues that would require several theses to tackle. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to conclude that while the notion of the promise-based psychological contract has tended to be theoretically symbolic and empirically rhetorical, there is a dearth of research to confirm or disconfirm the utility of promise in the psychological contract. Of the few, Cassar and Briner's (2009) findings showed that the Maltese employees' understandings of promise were different from the academic explanations. Because the meaning of promise (and related behaviours) varies across societies (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000), and there is no research investigation in China in this light, the second research question of this study is:

Research Question 2: How do Chinese workers interpret 'promise', especially in the employment context?

Rousseau (2001) states that ‘a promise made to a goldfish or a robot is not binding, because an exchange of promises requires competence and intent, meaning that both promisor and promisee should know what they are doing’ (p526). This means that for a promise to be ‘contractual’, it is necessary that both parties must have the competence to communicate. The parties to the psychological contract become the focus to which I now turn.

2.4 Parties to Psychological Contracts

Because the conversational competence of the promisor and the promisee is necessary for a promise to be conveyed and understood, for a psychological contract to exist between an organisation and an employee, the organisation is assumed to have the capability to communicate with the employee through, for example, organisational culture and structures (Rousseau, 2001). This brings about an ongoing conceptual debate (e.g., Guest, 1998; Cullinane & Dundon, 2006) and empirical divide (cf. Hui, Lee & Rousseau, 2004; Guest & Conway, 2002) on whether an organisation can possess psychological contracts with its employees. While Rousseau’s (1989) argument for taking a stance that the organisation cannot have psychological contracts because it cannot ‘perceive’ seems convincing (also see Rousseau & Parks, 1993; Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Bal & Vink, 2011), some scholars disagree (e.g., Kotter, 1973; Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 1998; Raeder, Knorr & Hilb, 2012; Metz et al, 2012). For example, Schein (1980) suggests that the ‘organization also has more implicit, subtle expectations’ that may be inferred from norms and rules, company practices and documents, cooperate objectives and strategies, and business climate and history (p23).

Because this thesis investigates the psychological contract from an employee's perspective, it would seem superfluous to engage in the above debate. But it is worth a note that both approaches generally agree on the position that organisations can be anthropomorphised from the employee perspective (Rousseau, 1989; Levinson, et al, 1962; Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Metz et al, 2012), arguing that employees tend to 'take it personally' when their psychological contracts are breached (Rodwell & Gulyas, 2013, p2774) and they do 'strike back' (Bordia, Restubog & Tang, 2008, p1104). Therefore, Conway and Briner (2005) argue that the organisation, as 'the other party' of the contract, may be perceived to be 'capable of being caring, loyal, generous, and so on' (p33).

However, there is no straightforward answer to who/what represents the organisation. For example, it is uncertain whether 'the employee interprets actions by the organization's agents as actions by the organization itself' (Conway & Briner, 2005, p33). Morgan and King (2012) suggested that 'supervisor breach explain(s) intention to leave the organization' (p629), while Chambel (2014) confirmed that both permanent and temporary workers distinguished their psychological contracts with the organisation and the supervisor. On this point, Rousseau (2011) suggests that employees may construe the other party as their employer, organisation, 'manager, senior executives, customers, team members, or even themselves' (p208). At the same time, there is a general recognition of multi-foci psychological contracts at work (e.g., Cullinane & Dundon, 2006; Svensson & Wolven, 2010), which has triggered recent scholarly interest in organisational agents' perceptions and their psychological contracts (Bao et al, 2011;

Si & Li, 2008; Metz et al, 2012), as well as the ‘spillover’ effect both within (e.g., Conway et al, 2014, p1) and outside the organisations (e.g., Dawson, Karahanna & Buchholtz, 2013).

One perspective to understand employees’ differing perceptions of ‘the other party/ies’ to their psychological contracts (cf., Cassar & Briner, 2009; Seeck & Parzefall, 2008; Marks, 2001) is through the lens of socio-cultural influences. While typical parties to the psychological contract include the individual employee, the organisation, and/or its agents, both legal and cultural systems directly influence whom the employee perceive the other parties are to his or her psychological contracts. For example, in Muslim culture, employees might view God as ‘the other party’ (see Krausz, 2000), whereas in Australia, their co-workers (‘mates’) might be included (see Kabanoff, Jimmieson & Lewis, 2000). In some employment environments where collective bargaining is prevalent, such as in France and Malta, the union or professional associations may be held responsible for keeping psychological contracts of employees (see Cardin, 2000; Cassar & Briner, 2009). Rousseau and Schalk (2000) argue that in an employment relationship where the government places great intervention on employment practices, workers may hold their government as responsible for their employment terms.

Related to the above, the role of government also determines levels of agreements between parties, and thus who is responsible for the employment conditions, particularly through the levels of bargaining (cf., Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). As a third party to the industrial relation system, governments may directly intervene the

employment agreements for certain groups of workers or sectors by imposing laws to specify employment conditions (Dunlop, 1993). Societal constructs, such as law and social hierarchies, also influence how parties are viewed between business owners and workers (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). Despite these acknowledged controversies on ‘the other party’, the discussion on this topic seems *ad hoc* while largely neglecting the recommendation that relevant information should be obtained in order to better understand the psychological contract (Rousseau, 2011).

Rousseau and Schalk (2000) maintain that ‘parties to contract’ is one of the key components of the psychological contract. The notion is important not just over the empirical controversy, and thus the difficulties in consolidating research findings on the psychological contract, but also for the levels of agreements. The latter is significant to the scope of psychological contract obligations, as it is suggested that collectively negotiated, and thus standardised, employment obligations are not psychological contracts (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). This may be understood in a similar way to the notion of societal meta-obligations discussed earlier, in that it may be reasonably expected that relatively standardised employment obligations negotiated by unions, for example, may affect individual psychological contracts. By understanding who/what employees perceive as the other party/parties of their psychological contracts, it may help in distinguishing psychological contracts from other standardised employment obligations.

Perhaps more importantly, it is risky to assume: a) the employee has a single

psychological contract at work, b) all terms used in questionnaires to represent the other party (e.g., company, employer, supervisors, organisation) capture the same empirical phenomenon, and/or, related to this, c) the current psychological contract theory applies to phenomena captured by different terms used for 'the other party'. Putting it plainly, would all the existing research be about the psychological contract as we now know it? Would it be possible that some of the research has captured some other phenomena (maybe pertaining to other similar constructs)? More specifically, what would be the possibilities of having employees who considered God, co-workers, themselves or customers as the other party/ies – would the theory still apply? How would we define 'breach' if the contract was with ourselves or God (e.g., Seeck & Parzefall, 2008)? Would we still feel violated, in the same way and with the same hypothesised consequences, for example, leaving the employer (or religion) (Morrison & Robinson, 1997)?

To be fair, it would seem reasonably safe to assume that most employees do have psychological contracts with their employer/organisation/company/supervisor and maybe also that these are the 'main' psychological contracts at work. Still, there are a few points worth serious considerations. First of all, the nature of psychological contracts is subjective (Rousseau, 1989). It has been specifically conceptualised to capture the idiosyncratic and individually created aspects of employment relationships, *not* the standardised or common (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). On what ground, other than for the convenience of data collection, could we justify the ignorance of the 'minority' who think idiosyncratically about the parties responsible for their workplace

obligations?

Secondly, while ‘supervisor’ is not uncommonly used to operationalise or even conceptualise the psychological contract (cf., Conway & Briner, 2005), this brings about a fundamental issue that whether this stream of research really studies the psychological contract as a theory of the relationship between the employee and the employer. Since preliminary research evidence shows that employees do distinguish between their psychological contracts with the organisation and the supervisor (e.g., Chambel, 2014), it seems rather difficult to eliminate the possibility that research using ‘supervisor’ in their measurements instead studies the dyadic exchange relationship between the supervisor and the employee, whereby the supervisor *is* the other party to the psychological contract *rather than* representing the employing organisation. This issue may be particularly relevant in China.

Hui, Lee and Rousseau (2004) adopted ‘supervisor’ as the other party because ‘in China, reciprocity to important people in the workplace is a more meaningful concept than reciprocity to the abstract entity of an organization’ (p315). A logical inference from this would be that psychological contracts with supervisors are more prevalent and powerful (i.e., ‘meaningful’) than that with the organisation in the Chinese context. While this somewhat casts doubts on the value of studying employee-organisation relationships in comparison to that of the subordinate-supervisor, this is beyond the scope of this research. At issue here is that other studies in China adopted ‘employer’ (Chen, Tsui & Zhong, 2008; Lee et al., 2011; Gardner et al., 2014) and ‘organisation’ (Si, Wei & Li,

2008; Bao, et al., 2011), which are more commonly seen in the western literature. The fundamental issue herein is not the measurement controversy on ‘other party’, but the measurement itself. Instead of finding out the contextualised contents for the subordinate-supervisor psychological contracts in the Chinese context (see Lee et al., 2011), Hui, Lee and Rousseau (2004) administered the highly westernised psychological contract index (PCI; Rousseau, 2000b), which was generated and used for the employee-organisation psychological contracts. It is doubtful that two sets of perceived employment obligations are interchangeable, not the least that Lee and colleagues (Lee et al., 2011) ‘evaluated item meaningfulness...then eliminated obligations that appeared to be inappropriate in China’ (p209). Since psychological contracts are ‘a subjective phenomenon not only individually but culturally’ (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000, p6), there is an empirical question to ask on how scholars should conduct the research in countries wherein ‘the other party’ may be culturally different from that identified by the existing research in the West (e.g., Lee et al., 2011).

An initial step forward to answering this is to explore employees’ perceptions about ‘other party’ in a given society. Since there is no such research in the existing literature in China, the third research question for this study is:

Research Question 3: Who is considered ‘the other party’ of the employment relationship by Chinese workers?

The next step would be understanding the ‘why’: why employees hold respective parties responsible for their subjective employment experiences and construe obligations and promises at work as such in China? To answer this, it is appropriate to explain why people may have different psychological contract experiences in the first place; that is, how do subjective perceptions come to form as binding agreements? Rousseau (2001; 2011) maintains that this is through reaching the *perceived* mutuality between parties, to which I now turn.

2.5 The Paradox of Subjectivity and Mutuality in Psychological Contracts

Mutuality is the foundation of behavioural and commitment alignments at work (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004). However, the contemporary psychological contract literature is to a great extent built on the assumption that ‘two parties to a relationship...may each hold different beliefs regarding the existence and terms of a psychological contract’ (Rousseau, 1990, p331). The employee’s perceived mutuality suffices, i.e., it is *perception* that counts, as underpinned by Thomas’ influential statement that ‘if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences’ (in Goffman, 1974, p1). There are two important implications of this position. Firstly, it is radically distant from the stance of legal contracts where ‘agreement, or at least the outward appearance of agreements, was an essential ingredient of a contract’ (Furmston, 2012, p98). In contrast, the psychological contract emphasises the subjective aspects of the employment relationship, suggesting that perceived agreements, rather than actual agreements, are necessary to form psychological contracts (Conway & Briner, 2005). The value in the psychological contract lies in that some important aspects of psychological processes of

the employment relationship cannot be accounted for by the specified, explicit and well defined formal contracts (e.g., see Levinson, Price & Munden, 1962). Secondly, it differs from earlier research that the matching of expectations seemed to be at-the-heart of psychological contracts (see Section 2.1.1). While acknowledging the importance of actual mutuality (Rousseau, 2001), the psychological contract stresses on the fulfilment of perceived obligations in studying workplace behaviours (Rousseau, 1989); the degree of mutuality, in turn, influences the likelihood of psychological contract fulfilments (Guest & Conway, 2002). There are two critical issues in regard to subjectivity and mutuality: individual perceptions and mutuality between parties.

2.5.1 Factors Relating to Individual Perceptions

Perceptions are at the centre of the psychological contract (Rousseau, 2011); at the core of its definition (e.g., Herriot & Pemberton, 1997). Several psychological contract theorists have suggested how perceptions emerge. For example, Morrison and Robinson (1997) hypothesise in detail about how unmet promises may be perceived as the breach that can be developed into violation. Guest (2004a) suggests a range of variables as antecedents of psychological contracts, such as age, gender, education, level in organisation, type of work, hours worked, employment contract, ethnicity, tenure, and income; plus organisational factors such as organisation sector, size, ownership, business strategy, and union recognition. Against wider social backgrounds, these factors also include organisational policies and practices, such as HR policy and practices, direct participation, employment relations and organisational culture/climate (ibid). These variables are categorised by others as ‘factors outside the organisation’,

‘organisational factors’, and ‘individual and social factors’ (e.g., Conway & Briner, 2005, pp48-53). In consolidating the literature, Rousseau (2011) adopts a framework of ‘personality and social factors’ and ‘organisation and management practices’ (pp197-198) to explain factors directly shaping the perceptions of employment obligations.

Rousseau (2011) refers to personality as a term to broadly describe differences innate to an individual and/or shaped by society. Individual differences influence the likelihood that employees will incorporate certain beliefs into their psychological contracts (Rousseau, 2011). Differences in personal values, needs, motives and ideologies may shape employment/exchange beliefs, providing foundations of individual perceptions (Rousseau, 2001). Research indicated that doctors were likely to have pre-employment administrative and professional ideologies toward different sets of duties and obligations (Bunderson, 2001; Thompson & Bunderson, 2003). For example, Rousseau (1990) concluded that newly graduated MBA students differed in their perceived obligations and expectations by different career motives. Similarly, perceived motives for research collaboration were suggested to impact on the relationship quality between doctoral students and their supervisors (Wade-Benzoni, Rousseau & Li, 2006). In addition, conscientious individuals tend to perceive more employer obligations than the nonconscientious (Raja, Johns & Ntalianis, 2004). Better educated employees were found to expect more than their less educated counterparts (Bellou, 2009; Roehling, 2008). Through social cues and socialisation (Conway & Briner, 2005), these individual differences are embedded in social influences that may engender many other important

individual predispositions (see Section 2.3.2).

Organisation and management practices are suggested to be another set of antecedents of psychological contracts (Guest, 2004a; Rousseau, 2011). At the outset of employment, neither party of the contract could recall all relevant past experiences or spell out all the details of future work arrangements due to the limits of human consciousness (Rousseau, 2011; McCormick, 2005). Therefore, the interview processes and post-interview experiences may predict the nature of psychological contracts (Purvis & Cropley, 2003), although some may argue that the former is less important than the latter in psychological contract developments (Rousseau, Hornung & Kim, 2009; Sutton & Griffin, 2004). Research also shows that predated management practices, such as previous experiences of downsizing, may affect employees' trust for subsequent employers (Kim & Choi, 2010) and their psychological contracts (Pate & Malone, 2000).

Once on the job, the degree of fulfilment of existing psychological contracts affect the subsequent psychological contract development (Lee et al., 2011), revision (Rousseau, 2011) and dissolution (Tomprou et al., 2015). The psychological contract fulfilment may have impacts on the perceived future obligations (Lee et al., 2011). For example, volunteers who sensed psychological contract fulfilments enhanced their intention to remain and participated in future job-related roles (Farmer & Fedor, 1999). In contrast, Robinson, Kraatz and Rousseau (1994) found that psychological contract breach significantly increased perceived employer's obligations while decreasing the number

on the employee's side. This is consistent with research evidence that breach generates psychological contract changes (Grimmer & Oddy, 2007; Payne et al., 2015). Following on from this and based on the hypothesised tolerance and acceptance thresholds, Freese (2007) concluded three psychological contract strategies to organisational change including balancing, revision and desertion. From another perspective, the most recent post-violation model explains similar strategies based on schema and social cognition (Tomprou et al., 2015). In addition, employees' trust in the organisation was found significant for perceived obligations (Roehling, 2008).

It is less clear of what processes or practices underlie these changes or developments of perceptions, but employees tend to be more active in information-seeking during their early employment and socialisation (Rousseau, 2001; De Vos & Freese, 2011), wherein leaders (Gundry & Rousseau, 1994; Dabos & Rousseau, 2013) and co-workers (Lai, Rousseau & Chang, 2009) play important roles for information-sharing and beliefs shaping (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004a). Organisational agents such as HR professionals and managers may have their own psychological contracts with workers which may impact on employees' psychological contracts (Claes, 2005; Tekleab & Taylor, 2003; Atkinson, 2008). For example, a recent study found that applicants' psychological contracts may be influenced by recruiters' relationships with the organisation (Shore, Dulebohn & Ehrhart, 2009). Managers may send biased messages of formal policies to employees based on own perceptions and judgements of the company, which may affect the development of employees' psychological contracts (Rousseau, 2011).

There are also several other factors identified by the empirical research that appear to be

influencing individual perceptions of their employment obligations. Employment status is suggested to significantly influence the psychological contract (Guest, 2004a). Research generally supports this view, though results are less straightforward and inconsistent (cf., Isaksson et al, 2010; Guest, Isaksson, De Witte, 2010; Van Dyne & Ang, 1998; Silla, Gracia & Peiro, 2005; McDonald & Makin, 2000; Chambel & Castanheira, 2006, 2007). It may be interesting to note that psychological contract contents may differ in different employment statuses. For example, psychological contracts of foreign contractors were argued to be distinct (O'Leary-Kelly et al, 2014). In another study, Guzzo, Noonan and Elron (1994) highlighted some salient but uncommon exchange dimension of expatriate managers. Similarly, Chrobot-Mason (2003) suggested that minority-group employees have specific expectations on diversity management practices, while Chambel et al (2016) showed that permanent and non-permanent workers had different psychological contract profiles. In a recent study, Low, Bordia and Bordia (2016) demonstrated that workers had differed psychological contract elements across career stages. Furthermore, fulltime and part-time workers seem to show significant differences in their psychological contracts, indicated by accommodating psychological contract changes during employment transitions from full to part-time (Dick, 2006; 2010) or office-based to home-based work (Tietze & Nadin, 2011).

Another frequently studied factor is age. Research on age seems to yield relatively conclusive findings. In a meta-analysis of age as a moderator of psychological contract breach and job attitudes, Bal et al (2008) concluded that younger and older employees

may have different work-related perceptions and expectations and thus different types of psychological contracts (see Caldwell, Farmer & Fedor, 2008; for an exception see Roehling, 2008). In exploring age-related differences in psychological contract balance perceptions, Vantilborgh et al (2013) suggested that as people aged they preferred a matching degree of the psychological contract balance in light of exchange agreements. Older employees were also argued to have realistic expectations (Thomas & Anderson, 1998) since their perceptions are ‘forming to a great extent their working reality’ (Bellou, 2009, p823). These differences can be argued on several theoretical grounds such as lifespan theory (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004); age-related self-efficacy and thus perceived contract replicability and malleability (Ng & Feldman, 2009); schema stability (Rousseau, 2001); socio-emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1992), future time perspective (Bal et al, 2010) and generativity theory (McAdams et al, 1993).

Organisational tenure seems to be another potential factor. New comers often experience potential schema changes due to active sense-making (Morrison, 1993a; 1993b; Rousseau, 2001; De Vos, Buyens & Schalk, 2003). This is consistent with the theory that individuals often experience ‘reality shock’ in the encountering stage of employment because of perceived discrepancy between what is expected and received (Louis, 1980; Schein, 1978). On one hand, organisational tenure was argued to be “‘freezing’ psychological contract perceptions” (Bal, Cooman & Mol, 2013, p111; Sparrow, 1996). On the other hand, Ng and Feldman (2009) suggested ‘that work experience (is)...positively related to contract malleability’ due to ramifications of age and seniority (p1063). While it seems reasonable that new comers and experienced

employees have different psychological contracts, it is not clear what the differences are or in which way(s). Other factors possibly influencing psychological contracts include firm size (Atkinson, 2008), industrial position (Snell, 2002), locality (Westwood, Sparrow & Leung, 2001), work premise (Chambel & Alcover, 2011), business sector (McDermott, Heffernan & Beynon, 2013) and individual circumstances (Blenkinsopp, 2007). Similar to that individual perceptions are subject to such varieties of factors, the matching of perceptions between parties is not immune to influences. Mutuality between parties is the matter to which I now turn.

2.5.2 Factors Influencing Mutuality

Fundamentally, the need of mutuality in the psychological contract resides with the argument that agreements or ‘matching expectations’ between parties engender motivation to act toward the agreed terms or to fulfil mutual expectations (Argyris, 1960; Schein, 1964; Kotter, 1973; Guest & Conway, 2002). This line of reasoning has profound ramifications for the practical implications of psychological contract research that primarily aims to tackle issues of communicating (Guest & Conway, 2002), and thus managing contract changes (Rousseau, 1995; Chaudhry, Wayne & Schalk, 2009; see Conway & Briner, 2005). Accordingly, some research has been centred on managing contracts to facilitate organisational change (van der Smissen, Schalk & Freese, 2013; Herriot & Pemberton 1997; Tomprou, Nikolaou & Vakola, 2012), as well as to reduce ‘deviant behaviours’ (Robinson & Bennett, 1995, p557; Restubog, Bordia & Tang, 2007; Sayers et al., 2011). As an essential building block of the psychological contract, mutuality is discussed from several perspectives. In acknowledging the cognitive bias

toward false consensus (Turk & Salovey, 1985), Rousseau (2001) concedes that 'perceived agreement is a necessary, but not the only, condition needed to achieve mutuality' (p534). She draws on social information processing (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), communication (Higgins & Bargh, 1987), and cognitive theories (Taylor & Brown, 1988) to discuss the objective accuracy of message (Rousseau, 1995), shared information (Rousseau, 2001), and the roles of common experience and frames of reference (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004). Rousseau (2001) goes further to suggest that power difference is a significant consideration on employees' willingness and frequency to share information, right to consent and to reject terms, likelihood to engage in contract negotiations, and bargaining powers (Rousseau, 2001a).

Firstly, the objective accuracy of individual perceptions is determined by the *communication process* consisting of the message, encoding and decoding (Rousseau, 1995; emphasis added). In the context of organisations, several sources of messages appear important. For example, the explicit communication/statements from top management that potentially navigate the meaning ascribed to organisational actions by employees; the observations of co-workers (and the referent others) and their treatments from the organisation to inform vicarious learning (e.g., Gundry & Rousseau, 1994); expressions of organisational policies in, for example, the employee handbook, performance management, compensation and benefit schemes and promotion practices; and socialisation and social constructions such as social cues and information from co-workers and references to historical events.

Encoding involves the promise-making process by the organisations (Rousseau, 1995).

According to Rousseau (1995), whether a message is appropriately encoded to be conveyed to employees depends on: the perceived authority of the promise maker that in turn decides on the credibility of the promise; and, the context of promise-making signalling the need for the promised commitments and the consistency of the message. The decoding process is affected by: the explicitness of the message; it is subject to individual motives for work and career (Inkson & King, 2010) and cognitive biases such as unrealistic optimism (Taylor & Brown, 1988). In turn, the effectiveness of communication process and the degree of freedom from biases determine objective accuracy of individual perceptions (Rousseau, 1995; 2011). Empirically, Guest and Conway (2002) found that companies commonly used three types of communication strategies to ensure effective communication with employees, including top-down communication (e.g., mission statement), job-related communication (i.e., job descriptions) and daily communication (i.e., informal day-to-day interactions). Grant (1999) argues that these HRM practices construct a rhetoric that leads to different types of hypothetical psychological contracts, including the congruent contract, the mismatched contract, the partial contract and the trial contract.

The second factor of mutuality is the *availability of common information*. The shared information may be biased due to shared frames of references that filter perceptions and judgements, while a common information pool facilitates the accomplishment of mutual agreements (Rousseau, 2001). Since people may possess different vantage points, the same information may be interpreted differently. However, common experiences and backgrounds may enhance shared understanding and cast a common frame of reference

helping achieve objective mutuality (Rousseau, 1996; Dabos & Rousseau, 2004). In addition, the availability of common information also depends on employees' willingness to share, which in turn is highly related to power distance and employment rights (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000).

The *power distance* between parties may result from the leadership style and cultural influences that affect the information flow. For example, democratic leaders may promote employee participations that help sharing information between the employee and the management; in contrast, a highly autocratic leader may hinder two-way communication. Similarly, certain cultures, the Chinese for example, may discourage direct communication and regard direct asking for something as disrespectful (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000); therefore information is less easily shared in such cultures. Power difference may impede information-sharing and result in employees' reluctance to make known his/her work preferences to the employer. In addition, it may also outline the bargaining powers between parties, or the employee's right to consent and to reject terms (Rousseau, 2001).

Finally, the *perceived bargaining power of employees* is principally decided by legal structures of a society (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). This relates to both prior and during employment negotiations of employment terms. When employees perceive themselves as having fair rights to bargain for their preferred work arrangements, there is less reason to withhold information about, or avoid addressing, their interests. Accordingly, the employment relationship is leveraged by the parties' relative powers. Collective

agreements – either culturally inscribed by collective cultures (Thomas et al., 2010) or structurally reinforced by trade unions (Cassar & Briner, 2009) – may be considered as a countermeasure to balance the uneven powers inherent in the capitalist employment relationships (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006).

Power difference and perceived bargaining powers are critical determinants to the psychological contract (see Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). For example, when the perceived power distances are high and rights to negotiate employment terms low, the likelihood of mutuality is decreased. The factors influencing mutuality, in turn, vary across-nationally (see later). Socio-cultures, therefore, influence both individual perceptions and the likelihood of mutuality between parties. How such factors influence psychological contracts in general is the matter to which I now turn.

2.5.3 Socio-cultural Influences on Psychological Contracts

A portion of socio-cultural influences on some aspects of the psychological contract has been reviewed in the sections earlier. This section attempts to review the comprehensive framework by Sparrow (1998) in regard to the broader comprehension of cultural influences on psychological contracts. Specifically, he suggests three linkages: predispositions, structural signals from HRM policies and practices, and social cues (ibid).

2.5.3.1 Predisposition

While there is a cross-national comparability in certain motivational drivers such as achievement motives (Wade-Benzoni, Rousseau & Li, 2006; De Cuyper & De Witte, 2008) and work values (Scheel & Mohr, 2013), cultural differences do exist (Fischer & Schwartz, 2011; cf. Elizur, 1979; Sagie, Elizur & Yamauchi, 1996). These cross-national differences relate to role-related, motivational and attitudinal focuses as well as the meaning of career success (Dries, 2011) and centrality of work (Fischer & Schwartz, 2011). In addition, unique societal attitudes toward certain particular profession/industry may have profound influences on specific psychological contracts in that culture (Chambe & Alcover, 2011). Related to this, social cues are argued to mediate judgements on the standard of behaviours (Sparrow, 1996).

2.5.3.2 Business Practices

Psychological contracts are argued to be prone to nationally distinctive practices and differed policy trajectories (Sparrow, 1998; also see Zaidman & Elisha, 2016). Culture has an impact on general management practices (French, 2010) as well as particular policies on selection and development (Segalla, Sauquet & Turati, 2001), assessment plans (Scholarios et al., 2008) and termination (Segalla, Jacobs-Belschak & Müller, 2001). It may also influence the perceptions of career management (Derr & Laurent, 1987) and managers' socialisations that affect selection, promotion and transfer decisions (Budhwar & Sparrow, 1998). In a cross-national study, different countries scored differently on structural empowerment practices (see Sparrow & Budhwar, 1997). Sparrow (1996) summarised these culturally different organisational practices into four categories, including change stance, authority, judgement and identification. In

summary, Sparrow (1996) suggests that culture affects national business systems, which determine the social messages on a variety of factors, including valued skills and competencies, performance criteria, internal and external career anchors and perceptions, occupational realities, the credibility of contractor, power in contracting, negotiation orientation and the relevance of factors beyond manager-subordinate relationships. In turn, these organisation and management practices shape individual psychological contracts (Rousseau, 2011). Business practices are not just cultural but also socio-historical, including factors such as management transition history, education system, (political and economic) business environment, legal laws and so on (Ramirez, 2004). Klarsfeld and Mabey (2004) argue that the national differences within Europe structurally differ national models of management practices, including the Anglo-Dutch (managed development approach), the Germanic (functional approach) and the Latin (elite political approach). These models are in consonance with Ramirez's (2004) arguments that the national differences in management practices are historical and structural.

Fundamentally, the employment terms – explicit or implicit – are always bargained against the backdrop of employment laws and legal contracts (Macaulay, 1985). The 'zone of bargain' – constrained or enforced by laws – has tremendous effects on the creation, development and revision of psychological contracts (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). As an example, the transformation of social legislation on equity practices was found to have significant effects on psychological contracts among ethnic groups (Wöcke & Sutherland, 2008). Societal regulations, in turn, relate to the levels and

accessibility of social protections. For example, government officials in India are well protected with secured employment, but not other white-collar workers (Shah, 2000). In Europe, social protections for different types of nonstandard workers varied amongst different countries (see Buschoff & Protsch, 2008).

National laws could also shape a society's levels of tolerance of unequal distribution and the discrepancy in wealth, affecting employees' perceived bargaining powers at work (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). Legal systems tend to be different cross-nationally and may be distinctive. For instance, some societies may adopt English common law system, such as Australia, New Zealand, the UK and the US; some establish laws based on Germanist and Romanist codes such as France, and Belgium; and others may possess more complex legal systems founded on diversified legal codes such as Mexico and Japan. In Malaysia, the legal system is founded on both the English common law and the Islamic law codes, whereas in China the labour contract laws, despite its short history, may trace back to some root codes established in the Qing dynasty. These national laws ingrain different take-for-granted assumptions of employment practices. Another source to influence such assumptions is social cues, to which I now turn.

2.5.3.3 Social Cues

As psychological contracts are construed in a given social context (Morrison & Robinson, 1997), the collective working of cultural values, beliefs and assumptions take form of what Thomas, Au and Ravlin (2003) term the 'culturally based scripts', i.e., the 'behavioral scripts...used in interactions based on contextual cues' (p463). Three

important sources for social cues are cultural beliefs and values, external employment environment, and language.

To start with, cultural beliefs influence the zone of negotiability determined by bargaining power limits (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). Markus and Kitayama (1991) referred to these in terms of self-concepts, into which Singelis et al (1995) suggested incorporating the vertical/horizontal dimensions: vertical self represents the acceptability of inequality and the horizontal self expects fairness amongst people. This in part relates to the degree to which psychological contracts are collectively or individually negotiated, which in turn influences types of psychological contracts (Janssens, Sels & Van Den Brande 2003; Sels, Janssens & Van Den Brande, 2004; Thomas et al, 2010). Sparrow (1998) refers to the cultural effects as ‘conformance’, which influences levels of loyalty, self-respect, group pressure and maintenance of face. Social cues may also be interpreted from external employment environments. Metz et al (2012) found that global financial crisis had an impact on the psychological contracts of those working in the affected sectors. Ng and Feldman (2008) showed that perceived labour market influenced perceived obligations of the employer. Similarly, business environment is an important factor in shaping psychological contracts (Westwood, Sparrow & Leung, 2001). In addition, perceived employability could affect employees’ employment expectations (De Cuyper, Van der Heijden & De Witte, 2011). Rousseau and Schalk (2000) suggest that national education systems may prime students with certain schema on career management and beliefs about employment which may shape their anticipatory psychological contracts at work.

Essentially, culture dictates a frame of reference to extract social cues from contexts (Thomas, Au & Ravlin, 2003), especially under uncertainty and ambiguity (Ravlin & Meglino, 1987). The common frame of reference for interpretations is consonant with the notion of social/collective identity (Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2009) which affects the source of social cues. The contexts for social cues determine the preferred degree of promise implicitness. In turn, preferred degree of explicitness depends on whether interpretations are based on a 'total environment' in high context cultures (e.g., China and Japan) embracing surrounding situations, physical environments and non-verbal behaviours; or, low context cultures (e.g., UK and US) where emphases are mainly given to explicit messages and rationally detached analyses (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000; Hall & Hall, 1990).

In summary, psychological contracts are both socio-culturally shaped and economic-politically casted; they also operate at psychological-cognitive levels. In addition to degrees of social stability and personal freedom that give rise to psychological contracts (Rousseau and Schalk, 2000), the society's industrial development status may also raise the question of whether 'individual employees really construct a truly independent form of free consciousness' (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006, p122). A particularly interesting point is that the widespread market-based rationality promoted and legitimised by capitalism in the Western societies (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Fournier & Grey, 2000) is argued to be so strong that it has become inconceivable to challenge for many citizens (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006). This dominant capitalism

ideology may, in turn, recast employees' perceptions of what appears to be normal/usual, inevitable or even 'modern' (Foucault, 1980). In this regard, China is both culturally distinctive and economic-politically unique compared to the West, where capitalism is politically the sole mindset and guiding principle for industrial developments. From this perspective, research in China provides an interesting lens to study the psychological contract (Horunung & Rousseau, 2012). The existing literature in China is the matter to which I now turn.

2.5.4 Psychological Contracts in China

The research in China is very limited but yields very interesting results. Hui, Lee and Rousseau (2004) were the first to point out the 'empirical question whether it is possible to study in a meaningful way worker-employer relationships...(in China) using approaches derived from more developed countries' (p311). To answer this question, two separate studies were carried out to first validate the PCI measure (Rousseau, 2000b) and then cross-validate the factor structure identified in the first study (Hui, Lee & Rousseau, 2004). After dropping six (out of 36) items, three contract types were validated by a confirmatory factor analysis: transactional, relational and balanced psychological contracts. Hui, Lee and Rousseau (2004) further claimed that these forms of contracts directly influenced Chinese workers' organisational citizenship behaviours (OCB) while the relational and balanced contracts also showed an indirect influence through instrumentality (Vroom, 1964) on influence altruism, conscientiousness, civic virtue, courtesy and sportsmanship (Podsakoff et al., 1990). The successful validation of the applicability of the psychological contract in China encouraged a few further

empirical (quantitative) studies.

Chen, Tsui and Zhong (2008) investigated employee-supervisor dyads data from a private manufacturing company in China. Consistent with Zhao et al. (2007), their findings revealed negative effects of breach on employee outcomes such as performance, OCB (Lee & Allen, 2002) and commitment (Meyer, Allen & Smith, 1993). However, the negative correlations were moderated by traditional Chinese values, measured by the traditionality (Yang, Yu & Yeh, 1989) in decision-making, respect to seniority, and dispute resolution, etc. (see Chen & Aryee, 2007). In a recent study, Gardner et al. (2014) investigated the role of organisational based self-esteem (OBSE, Pierce et al., 1989) on psychological contract fulfilment and work-related outcomes, such as job satisfaction (Hackman & Oldham, 1975), turnover intention (Walsh, Ashford & Hill, 1985) and in-role performance (Williams & Anderson, 1991). They concluded that both transactional and relational fulfilments were positively related to OBSE, which in turn partially mediated the relationships between fulfilments and work outcomes. From a different viewpoint, Bao et al (2011) investigated the effects of violation (Robinson & Morison, 2000). They found strong negative effects of violation on Chinese executives' affective commitment (Porter & Smith, 1970), which were moderated by job satisfaction (Janssen, 2001), job involvement (Lorence & Mortimer, 1985), job demand (Ganster & Fusilier, 1989), and locus of control (Paulhus, 1983), and partially moderated by hope (Snyder et al., 1996).

Bao et al (2011) attributed their results to the societal culture of China, arguing that

'executives (or lower level employees) from China may be relatively more vigilant in maintaining workable psychological contracts and more willing to 'mend' frustrations...because Chinese workers have less options to deal with...injustice' (p3390). They further suggest that this 'injustice' is resulted from contract arrangements and societal implications (ibid). Bao et al (2011) reason that breach elicits negative emotions among Chinese executives (e.g., anger and disillusionment), because Chinese employees may rely more on unwritten rules and informal relationships. It is interesting to note that, in another study (Si, Wei & Li, 2008), breach did not lead to expected negative behaviours among Chinese managers. In that study, Si, Wei and Li (2008) examined the effects of breach on managers' responses (i.e., exit, voice, loyalty or neglect, see Hirschman, 1970; Rousseau, 1995). They expected breach to be positively related to an increase of manager's exit and neglect, and a decrease in their voice and loyalty (ibid). While all hypotheses were partially supported, the most striking finding was that a breach of managers' transactional psychological contracts led to a reduction in their neglect (ibid). The authors suggested a possible explanation of Chinese managers' emphasis on social relationship balance, meaning they tend to use positive approaches such as working harder in order to fulfil their employment expectations (ibid). Si, Wei and Li (2008, p942) stated:

Most Chinese have a higher level of collectivism than do their counterparts in the West, whose cultures have higher levels of individualism (Earley 1989; Si and Cullen 1998; Parnell 2005). In general, people in a more collectivistic culture are much more likely try to maintain smooth interpersonal relations,

evaluate individual behaviour based on the group norm, and use positive ways to express their dissatisfactions (Hofstede 1980; Mente and Boyd 1989; Ralston, Gustafson, Cheung and Terpstra 1993).

More puzzlingly, two studies based on Thomas, Au & Ravlin's (2003) yielded quite dissimilar results. Thomas and colleagues (Thomas et al., 2010) conducted a cross-cultural study that revealed the Chinese 'custodial psychological contracts', pertaining to a combination of collective (Hofstede, 2010) and high-context (Hall & Hall, 1990) cultures. Custodial psychological contracts are relational in nature with asymmetric power between contract parties. For example, the authors defined two markers for coding their interview scripts, i.e., 'lack of control over negotiations' and 'trusting the company to look out for the employee's best interests' (Thomas, et al., 2010, p1147). Their data analysis confirmed that 'in vertical collectivist cultures such as China, psychological contracts will be described predominantly in terms of custodial exchange'. This conclusion is consistent with the traditional belief that Chinese tend to form relational exchanges, but it is somehow, as soon will be revealed, at odds with other empirical findings.

Based on the same framework (Thomas, Au & Ravlin, 2003), Zhao and Chen (2008) studied samples in China and America, hypothesising correlations between individualism (measured by Ramamoorthy & Flood, 2002) and transactional exchanges. This hypothesis was not supported by the American sample, but supported by the Chinese, who revealed significantly higher scores than the American on individualism,

which in turn had a strong positive association with transactional psychological contracts. This finding is in line with Hui, Lee and Rousseau (2004) who concluded that transactional psychological contracts may be preferred by the employees in China. In Hui, Lee and Rousseau (2004), OCB is found directly related to transactional exchanges whereas for relational and balanced contracts, the relationship was mediated by instrumentality. It is worth noting that this finding (Hui, Lee & Rousseau, 2004) is contrary to previous research (e.g., Rousseau, 1995), but in line with King and Bu (2005), albeit merely partially. In that research (King & Bu, 2005), the cross-cultural results showed no difference between the American and Shanghainese students in the transactional obligations of the employer.

In light of unexpected findings on transactional contracts and collectivism culture, researchers speculate a variety of possible explanations. King and Bu (2005) suggested that Shanghai students were assimilated by the Western market ideologies and business cultures, because their results showed that students in Beijing scored higher on relational obligations than both the American and Shanghai samples. Consequently, they also concluded subcultural differences between Beijing and Shanghai, suggesting students in Beijing hold more traditional values. Arguing in a similar vein, Hui, Lee and Rousseau (2004) explained their counterintuitive findings by referring to the Confucian value of hierarchy, ascribing the Chinese workers' preference of transactional exchanges to the higher tolerance of inequality. Curious enough, though, that while having the same assumption of power asymmetry in the Chinese culture, Thomas et al. (2010) found the relational tendency of psychological contracts in China. This tendency is

further endorsed by Hu, Tetrick and Shore's (2011) study on reciprocity norms, whereby it is suggested that 'reciprocity may be more salient in economic exchange in the USA...than in China where interest of the organization and the desire to maintain harmonious relations may overpower the effect of reciprocity on economic exchange' (pp544-545).

From a thought-provoking angle, Zhao and Chen (2008) conducted a further analysis of their Chinese samples and found a mediation effect of the individualism value between transactional obligations and age. They suspected that the individualist Chinese sample had more short-term and materialistic psychological contracts because they were on average younger than the American samples, indicating that the society is being transformed from a more relational to the transactional nature (ibid). Interestingly, the authors also concluded that individualism values were positively related to relational exchange obligations among Americans (ibid). As a result, while their suggestion was plausible, it did not really explain why their data revealed opposite associations between individualism values and employment obligations in the USA and China (ibid).

The most interesting research is the recent longitudinal research studies by Lee, Liu, Rousseau, Hui and Chen (2011) to investigate how fulfilment led to psychological contract change. In light of partial/marginal support for many of their hypotheses, the authors concluded that fulfilment played a multifaceted role in contract development and possible changes were 'in the eyes of employees' (ibid, p217). Not only does the research confirm the centrality of subjective perceptions, but more importantly it is

pioneering in significantly tailoring the research to national context. In lieu of using typical symmetry psychological contracts dimensionalities (i.e., same dimensions of perceived obligations for both sides of the contract), the study used transactional and relational dimensions for the employer's obligations but good performer and loyalty dimensions for the employee's obligations (ibid). This adaptation is significant for at least two reasons. First of all, it shows the empirical malleability of psychological contract contents and measures, thus their adaptability to individual contexts. Second, it indicates the uniqueness of local psychological contracts, especially in the case of China.

In summary, psychological contract behaviours in China require more in-depth investigation. The review of literature in this section reveals a few important conclusions. Firstly, the existing evidence is hardly convincing or conclusive to pinpoint what factors in which ways shape/influence psychological contracts or why, except that there is a large number of potentially important factors to the individual perceptions and mutuality between parties. Further complicating the matter, these factors vary across societies, as do psychological contracts. Not surprisingly, the research in China yields interesting but puzzling results that have led to different and contradictory speculations. It seems clear that a more fruitful approach to study psychological contracts in China is by listening to what the employees have to say about their own relevant experiences. Although this may not necessarily mean a completely grounded research approach, an exploratory study into the workers' own accounts of the implicit deals in the employment relationship seems timely. Accordingly, the final research question aims to

examine the workers' own accounts of the implied employment terms in China in relation to the existing literature:

Research Question 4: How do Chinese workers describe their perceptions of implicit employment terms?

Albeit beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to point out that the research on the workings of psychological contracts would be particularly challenging without an appropriate understanding of what psychological contracts are and how they are shaped. Another important note to mention at this point is that although Rousseau (1989; 1995; 2001; 2011) puts the perceptions of employees at the centre of the theory wherein they could play active roles in the interpretations and (re)negotiations of the employment exchange, Culinane and Dundon (2006) critically question its managerialist ideological purposes to regulate employees' thinking (see Dick & Nadin, 2011). The contradiction, however, is in a sense methodological, in that the predominant quantitative approach in the field seems to have largely overshadowed the unique feature of the theory:

'Cognition's (central) role in the psychological contract theory is at odds with traditional management research. Much of the latter's approach to workplace perceptions reflects the fallacy of naive realism, the assumption that what people perceive involves directly seeing the world as it is...Agency theory...is perhaps the most widespread model of employer/worker beliefs and actions...(but the) people agency theory portrays have neither history nor

personality and thus are only nominally individuals at all. They behave in a social vacuum...(and this) reductive view misrepresents a more complex reality...In contrast, psychological contract theory illuminates questions of human behaviour in organizations by building upon the fundamental processes of human and social cognition' (Rousseau, 2011; pp193-194).

It seems clear from the above that psychological contract researchers should consider employees as active agents in the employment relationship. Yet, what employees' agency/will entails for their psychological contracts has been to a great extent overlooked because of the prevailing questionnaire approach in the field of research (Seeck & Parzefall, 2008). Before turning to the next chapter that examines such methodological limitations of the existing research and explains the present research design, the table below summarises the research questions of this study (Table 2.3).

Table 2.3 Summary of Research Questions

Research Question 1	How do Chinese workers interpret 'obligations' in the employment context?
Research Question 2	How do Chinese workers interpret 'promise', especially in the employment context?
Research Question 3	Who is considered 'the other party' of the employment relationship by Chinese workers?
Research Question 4	How do Chinese workers describe their perceptions of implicit employment terms?

Chapter 3 Methodology

...(G)iven the underspecified nature of psychological contract theory, the degree of generality (of questionnaires) is perhaps not so much an item design fault as a design requirement of measures... A questionnaire approach is...incompatible with examining implicit beliefs (which are unlikely to be immediately consciously accessible); however, if psychological contract measures were worded in terms of explicit promises, they would be at odds with most researchers' views that psychological contracts are predominantly about implicit beliefs.

Conway & Briner (2009; p104)

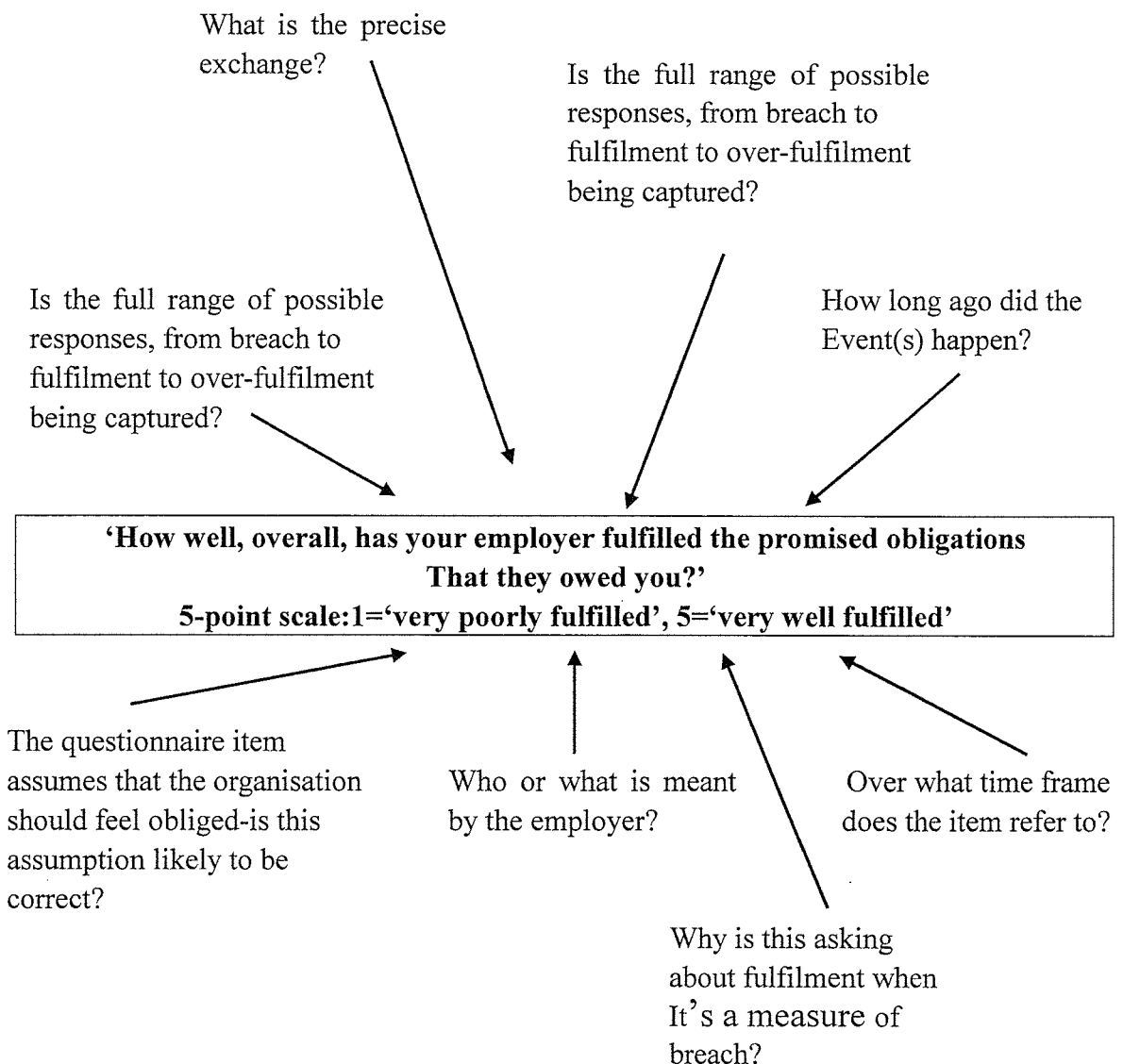
The above remark highlights three related areas for discussion in light of methodological issues of psychological contract research: the predominant quantitative empirical research approach, the difficulties faced by the approach, and the nature of the theory. This chapter begins by briefly discussing these methodological issues, leading to the design of this study.

3.1 Methodological Issues in Psychological Contract Research

To understand the methodological issues of the research, it is perhaps best to begin with the 'underspecified nature' of the theory, to which Conway and Briner (2009) attribute the methodological difficulties of the predominant quantitative field research. Most of the 'underspecified' theoretical areas have been identified in the previous chapter, such

as the broadly defined contents (Section 2.2.1), the undetermined temporal dimensions of the psychological contracting processes (Section 2.2.3) and consequences (Section 2.2.2), the constituent beliefs of psychological contracts (Section 2.3), and who/what represent the organisation (Section 2.4). The methodological difficulties directly related to these are comprehensively reviewed by Conway and Briner (2005) who later summarised key issues as below (Conway & Briner, 2009; Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 Methodological Difficulties in the Existing Research



Source: Conway and Briner (2009, p104).

An often overlooked difficulty is related to the design of quantitative research. This may be understood from two perspectives: the quality and availability of measurements. First, many of the commonly used measurements suffer from questionable reliabilities. On this issue, Freese and Schalk (2008) have critically assessed a variety of psychological contract measures, pointing out that many of them might not meet an adequate quality standard for scientific research. Second, the research feasibility of the psychological contract as a variance model inevitably depends on the measurability of variables. Following on from this, it is not surprising that most empirical research has used off-the-shelf measurements, such as demographical data and individual differences (cf., Armstrong, Cools & Salder-Smith, 2012). This ‘convenient sampling’ of variables can be significantly problematic for at least two reasons. Firstly, the scientific investigations on psychological contracts can be biased toward what is ‘convenient’ to measure rather than what might be more appropriate/fruitful to examine. Secondly, there can be considerable inconsistencies in the use of measurements, probably due to the researcher’s preferences or accessibility to the measures. For example, equity sensitivity has been studied under the names of: 1) personalities, defined as personal ‘traits’ (Raja, Johns & Ntalianis, 2004, p350); 2) ideologies, defined as ‘orientations reflecting an individual’s expectation’ (Coyle-Shapiro & Neuman, 2004; p150); and, 3) individual difference ‘that refers to a person’s preferences’ (Roehling, 2008, p269). Consequently, Raja, Johns and Ntalianis (2004) adopted Sauley and Bedeian’s (2000) items; Coyle-Shapiro and Neuman (2004) used the scale by Eisenberger et al (1986), while Roehling (2008) preferred a measure by Huseman, Hatfield, and Miles (1985) to measure equity sensitivity. Furthermore, these studies used inconsistent psychological

contracts measures, i.e., largely expectation-based psychological contract scale (PCS) (Millward and Hopkins; 1998), fully obligation-based assessments (Rousseau, 1990), and a self-developed Psychological Contract Survey derived from various studies (Rousseau 1990; Robinson, Kraatz & Rousseau, 1994; Robinson & Morrison 1995; Sims 1995), respectively. As a result, not only is it difficult to compare and conclude these findings, but also the research results are expected to inherit different limitations of the respective measurements employed (e.g. see Armstrong, Cools & Salder-Smith, 2012; Freese & Schalk, 2008). Partially as a result of these methodological limitations, notwithstanding ‘fifty years of psychological contract research’ (Conway & Briner, 2009, p71), ‘there are remarkably few consistent findings...and effect sizes (are) weak’ (p105).

Not surprisingly, there have been a number of calls for qualitative research, many of them by prominent scholars in the field (e.g., Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007; Conway & Briner, 2005; Rousseau, 2011). In response to these calls, recently there has been an increasing trend of qualitative studies on the psychological contract (e.g., Lam & Campos, 2015; O’Leary-Kelly et al., 2014; Collins, Cartwright & Hislop, 2013; Tietze & Nadin, 2011). However, the need for qualitative data proves to be under-accommodated by the field of researchers, who are predominantly quantitative, due to ‘practical, career and other reasons’ (Conway & Briner, 2009, p108).

Fundamentally, the ‘underspecified’ theoretical nature of the psychological contract

begs the question of to what extent quantitative approaches could empirically capture the phenomenon of psychological contracts, especially from the schema's perspective (see Sherman & Morley, 2015). There seems to be a paradox, though beyond the scope of this thesis, between the by-definition aggregated and generalised quantitative measures and the innately subjective and individualised phenomenon that is 'dynamic and highly sensitive to context' (Rousseau, 2011; p100). In other words, a questionnaire approach paradoxically a) assumes the generality of the psychological contract, which is conceptualised to capture the idiosyncratic elements of individual beliefs; and, b) measures the commonality of psychological contracts, whose empirical features vary 'as a function of the context' (Cassar & Briner, 2009, p678).

Specifically in the context of the present study, a qualitative approach seems entirely appropriate. On the research questions 1, 2 and 3, which examine the indigenous meanings of 'obligations', 'promises' and 'the other party' in China, a qualitative approach is advised (Rousseau, 2011; Cassar & Briner, 2009); so is the case for the research question (4) investigating the Chinese workers' own accounts of employment experiences (Hornung & Rousseau, 2012). It is reasonable to conclude that a qualitative approach is needed to answer the research questions of this study, and it is the epistemological assumptions underlying qualitative research that are discussed next.

3.2 Epistemological Principles Underpinning Qualitative Research

Epistemology studies the nature of knowledge, referring to how knowledge is obtained through research (Willig, 2013). There has been 'a long standing debate in the social

sciences about the most appropriate philosophical position from which methods (of obtaining knowledge) should be derived' (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe, 1991, p22). On one extreme, there is positivism that believes 'a singular, presumed-to-be true reality' (Rynes & Gephart Jr., 2004, p455) with the 'what you see is what you get' assumption about research (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012, p136). On the other, there is interpretivism that claims social science 'inquiry reflects the standpoint of the inquirer. All observation is theory-laden. There is no possibility of theory- or value-free knowledge' (Denzin, 2001, p3). It is beyond this sub-section to articulate the theories between and around these propositions (see Shepherd & Challenger, 2013 for a detailed discussion). For the purpose of this chapter, this subsection offers a brief account of the qualitative research and the fundamental principles.

As an 'emerging' paradigm, qualitative research has experienced difficulties in gaining reputations of 'good science' in an established field of knowledge (see Kuhn, 2012). Consequently, the number of qualitative papers published in management, especially organisational psychology, journals has been historically limited (e.g., Symon & Cassell, 1998). Symon, Cassell and Dickson (2000) issue a caveat against this trend, suggesting that 'we are in danger of becoming overly restrictive in both our theoretical development and the solutions we offer to organisations' (p457). In response to this, many (top) journals have been increasingly recognising the value of and called for this stream of research. For example, in his editorial 'Qualitative Research and the Academy of Management Journal', Rynes and Gephart Jr. (2004) remind potential contributors that:

(Q)ualitative research employs the meanings in use by societal members to explain how they directly experience everyday life realities. It builds social science constructs from members' "concepts-in-use" and focuses on the socially constructed nature of reality (Schutz, 1973)... (It) starts from and returns to words, talk, and texts as meaningful representations of concepts...(and) thus has an inherently literary and humanistic focus... An important value of qualitative research is description and understanding of the actual human interactions, meanings, and processes that constitute real-life organizational settings (p455).

Due to such ongoing efforts, there has been an increasing recognition of qualitative studies. Lee and colleagues (Lee, Mitchell & Sablynski, 1999; Bluhm et al., 2011) witnessed the 'continued proliferation of qualitative research in the field of management' (Bluhm et al., 2011, p1882). The growth in qualitative research is in line with the increasing interest in trying to explain social and organisational phenomena in naturalistic settings (cf. Bluhm et al., 2011). The data required for this line of inquiry, in turn, is more accessible to the qualitative than quantitative research (Rynes & Gephart Jr, 2004). As such, qualitative studies emphasise text, meaning and observations rather than mathematical/statistical reasoning.

In summary, unlike the typical hypothesis-testing approach, qualitative methodologies usually centre on meaning. Qualitative researchers 'do not tend to work with 'variables'...(which) would lead to the imposition of the researcher's meanings and it would preclude the identification of respondents' own ways of making sense of the

phenomenon under investigation' (Willig, 2013, pp8-9). The goal of qualitative research is to describe, explain and understand but not predict, and thus it is more suitable for inquiries concerning 'lived experience' from participants' own perspectives (cf. Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). How such experiences and perspectives may be empirically captured to answer the research questions of this study is the matter to which I now turn.

3.3 Research Design Rationale

The rationale of the research design is based on the aim of this study, which is to qualitatively examine psychological contracts in a context unfamiliar to the West, the Chinese to be precise. Albeit highly limited, research in China indicates Chinese workers' psychological contracts may be considerably different from their western counterparts'.

For example, Lee, Liu, Rousseau, Hui and Chen (2011) conducted preliminary interviews with 30 Chinese part-time MBA students and decided that it was more appropriate to use asymmetry dimensions to measure their participants' psychological contracts (see Section 2.5.4). Similarly, Wang (2008) concluded that the perceived 'organization's obligation of psychological contract consisted of transaction obligation, development obligation and interpersonal obligation, while the employee's obligation consisted of rules keeping (sic) obligation, organizational identify obligation and cooperation obligation' (p272). Wang's (2008) work is particularly worthy of attention because her questionnaire was based on CPI (Rousseau, 2000b), yet she adapted different dimensions to demonstrate results. At this point, we may assume two

possibilities for this. First, it may reflect some findings showing specific patterns/dimensions, possibly due to cultural influences (e.g., the use of ‘interpersonal’ instead of ‘relational’; or ‘rule-keeping’ instead of ‘transactional’). This hints toward Hornung and Rousseau’s (2012) recommendation that the taken-for-granted assumptions of Chinese workers’ employment experiences seem to require in-depth examinations. Second, it might be due to linguistic reasons and/or translation issues, i.e., the implications and cultural connotations attached to the language used in questionnaire items may not be fully translatable/transferrable between English and Chinese. This possibility is quite alarming: Blenkinsopp and colleagues recently warned management scholars against assuming universal understanding of concepts and phrases (Blenkinsopp & Gillet, 2013), as well as the loss in translation due to language and cultural implications (Blenkinsopp & Pajouh, 2010).

The above analyses warrant cautions against the assumption that the existing literature may adequately inform the research design for the present study. Consequently, a pilot study was carried out in early April 2014. It included a 45 minutes focus group and three Skype/telephone interviews, ranging from 20-35 minutes. The focus group consisted of three PhD students and two Master students who were studying at the University of Hull. Three interview participants were full-time employees, one working in Xiamen and two in Fushun. They are all Chinese and were recruited from the researcher’s personal network. One interview was conducted in English under the supervision of a supervisor via Skype; the rest of the pilot study was conducted in Chinese. Important notes were taken by the researcher on the spot and immediately

after.

The pilot study indicated difficulties in eliciting information from participants, especially regarding ‘implicit obligations/promises’, which may relate to b) participants’ understandings and experiences on employment promise/obligation related behaviours seemed noticeably different from the existing literature; and, depending on individual understandings and interpretations, there might be some Chinese terms denoting similar commitments of ‘promise’ and ‘obligation’, such as ‘guarantee’ and ‘responsibility’. After discussions with supervisors on a range of possibilities regarding the unfolding of fieldwork and/or empirical phenomena being examined, it seemed clear that a fully designed research at the outset might not be feasible or desirable.

Overall, however, these findings appear to favour semi-structured interviews for data collection, which are argued for both range and depth of data (Flick, 2009). Semi-structured interviews serve purposes of: a) uncovering individual experiences and interpretations; b) capturing the essences of complex processes; and, c) validating participants’ meanings before further analyses (Arksey & Knight, 1999; King, 1994). This research method has been the most tested qualitative instrument in psychological contracts research (Conway & Briner, 2005), especially in unfamiliar contexts (e.g., Giese & Thiel, 2015; O’Leary-Kelly et al., 2014; Dick, 2006, 2010; Cassar & Briner, 2009); among these, Cassar and Briner’s (2009) study on features of psychological contracts in Malta is of particular referential value to selecting participants for the current research. Sampling and research sites of the present study are matters to which I

now turn.

3.4 Participant Selection

In line with Cassar & Briner (2009), this study adopts a non-probability sampling strategy in that participants are drawn through the researcher's personal contacts. This strategy was preferred because it builds foundations for higher levels of trust between the researcher and researched (Creswell, 2014), which may increase data reliability and facilitate information extraction. These advantages seem especially critical for the present study (see pilot study results earlier). A particular challenge for this study is to define the 'Chinese context', i.e., systematically and meaningfully articulating the implicit aspect of employment experiences through the lens of Chinese workers. A difficult question to answer would be who represents 'Chinese workers'? While it must be stressed (again) that the aim of this study is *not* to make any bold claim on 'Chinese psychological contracts', I will now clarify this point.

Without doubt, it is extremely challenging, if not impossible, to justify any kind of findings to claim 'the' psychological contracts of a given society, considering their high contextual sensitivity. There is, however, a norm of the existing literature to ignore this issue. For example, Thomas et al.'s (2010) findings on 'Chinese psychological contracts' were based on interviews with 12 employees from a single organisation in China. Hui, Lee and Rousseau's (2004) recommendation for the psychological contract's conceptual generalisability in China was grounded in their surveys of employees in a Chinese state-owned steel company, 81 percent of whom were male. In some studies, important

factors shaping/influencing psychological contracts (see Section 2.5), such as occupation, age, organisational tenure, research sites, education or gender, are found unavailable to readers, especially in the Chinese context (e.g., Chen, 2010; Bao et al., 2013; Si, Wei & Li, 2013). In response, a variety maximisation strategy is preferred for this study (see Cassar & Briner, 2009). To be more specific, the sample variety was maximised in terms of organisational tenure, occupation/industry, age, employment status and education, i.e., important factors for psychological contract research (see Section 2.5). To reach the desired maximum variety, a snowballing strategy was used, when necessary, in order to extend the limits of the researcher's networks. Arguments for this strategy include that heterogeneity facilitates conceptual developments from extrapolating significant patterns or similarities in data collected (Patton, 2002), which also counter-argues the critique on the effects of data from homogeneous groups (Cassar & Briner, 2009).

Another challenge lies in selecting research sites. While preliminary evidence seems somewhat contradictory in regard to possible differences in psychological contracting processes between Chinese cities (cf., King & Bu, 2005; Si, Wei & Li, 2013), this issue, again, has tended to be ignored in the existing literature. A major limitation of research in China has been a tendency to overlook the majority of Chinese regions and instead typically focus on Shanghai and/or Beijing (cf., Hui, Lee & Rousseau, 2004; King & Bu, 2005; Lee et al., 2011; Si, Wei & Li, 2013). The research sites chosen for this study were Xiamen and Fushun, contrasting in economic and cultural features. These research sites, where the researcher had adequate contacts to carry out the sampling strategies,

are briefly introduced below.

Xiamen is an international tourism city, having been experiencing rapid developments since 1979 as one of the earliest Economic Special Zones. Being a strategically crucial spot located on the southeast coast of China, Xiamen is categorised as a vice provincial city and hosts massive migrants. In 2010, more than half of its residents were from various Chinese regions (Xiamen Statistics Bureau, 2011). Socio-culturally, Xiamen belongs to the Southern culture (see Wen et al., 2004) and represents metropolitan embracing cosmopolitan elements.

In contrast, Fushun is a northeast inland city, being traditionally famous for productions of coal, steel, aluminium and petroleum. The city has been undergoing slow-growth or stagnation due to a) a shift in national economic focus toward the coasts, and b) its gradual exhaustion of natural resources. The city has been suffering slight outward migration, mostly for economic reasons (Shen, 2004). Socio-culturally, Fushun belongs to the Northern culture (see Wen et al., 2004) and symbolises a less sophisticated society.

In total, 61 participants participated in the main research data collection (see Table 3.1). In addition to the 55 participants selected from the above research sites, six respondents were recruited to draw on additional insights and cross-check potential between-city/region variations. The sample size is in accordance with qualitative approaches (Creswell, 2014; Charmaz, 2006; Ritchie, Lewis & Elam, 2003; Green &

Thorogood, 2004) and the field norm (e.g., O’Leary-Kelly et al., 2014; Cassar & Briner, 2009; Collins, Cartwright & Hislop, 2013; Dick, 2006; 2010).

Table 3.1 Overview of Participants

Employment Status: <u>Cities:</u> Xiamen: 29 Fushun: 26 Dalian: 2 Fuzhou: 2 Suixi: 2	Civil servant (government): 1 Civil servant –alike (public institutions/government bureaus): 8 Fixed-term contract/permanent*: 27 Agency contract or outsourced: 17 Full-time employees without formal contracts: 3 (with the same employer for at least 7 years) Entrepreneur: 2 Part-timer: 1 Housewife: 1 Recently Unemployed: 1
Age <u>Range:</u> 22 to 53 years old <u>Average:</u> 31.5 years old	20-29 years old: 29 30-39 years old: 24 40-49 years old: 5 50 years old and above: 3
Gender	Male: 35 Female: 26
Education	Below High School: 9 High School: 8 Diploma: 12 Bachelor Degree: 29 Master: 3
Total Length of Employment <u>Range:</u> 5 months – 35 years <u>Average:</u> 8.1 years	1-5 years: 29 6-10 years: 20 11-30 years: 11 Above 30 years: 1
Total Number of Jobs <u>Range:</u> 1 – 9 jobs <u>Average:</u> 2.6 jobs	1 st job: 15 Have had 2-3 jobs: 32 Have had 4-5 jobs: 12 Have had 6-9 jobs: 2
Sector/Industry <u>Ownership**:</u> State-owned: 21 Public Companies: 5 Jointly Ownership: 16 Foreign-owned: 8 Privately-owned: 11	Banking: 7 Consultancy: 7 Power and automation technologies: 7 Law Enforcement: 6 Local Government: 6 Telecommunication: 5 Entertainment: 5 Public Health Care: 4 Public Education: 2 Training: 2 Wholesale/Retail: 2 Government Bureaus: 2 Insurance: 1 Energy: 1 Media: 1 Public Transport: 1 IT/Programming: 1 Manufacturing: 1

* Most participants did not know if they were permanent or fixed-term workers.

** According to the 25 organisations where the workers actually performed their work.

I will now elaborate on the fieldwork, beginning with interviews.

3.5 Interviews

In order to gather data to answer the research questions, interviews were conducted with primary interests on the following four topics:

1. What do participants understand about ‘obligation’ in their respective employment relationships?
2. What do participants understand about ‘promise’ in their respective employment relationships?
3. Who/what do participants consider ‘the other party’ of their respective employment relationships?
4. How do participants describe the implicit terms of their respective employment relationships?

While not every interview was conducted identically, a typical complete interview process took about 60-90 minutes (recording time: 30-45 minutes), including the following elements in the order as indicated:

A: 5-10 minutes to clarify pre-interview issues (see later);

B: 5-10 minutes to ‘warm-up’ in order to understand the participant’s motivations and build rapport (Fowler & Mangione, 1990);

C: 30-45 minutes interviews (recording time);

D: 10-15 minutes debriefing to clarify various concerned issues and to seek feedback on the interview process and further remarks (Paterson &

Scott-Findlay, 2002); and,

E: 5-10 minutes post-interview note-taking (after the participant had gone) on observations of participants' behaviours during the interviews (Glaser, 1978), as well as immediate sensemaking and feelings of the interview (Nadin & Cassell, 2004).

Before interviews began, all participants were encouraged to raise any concerns that might prevent them from speaking freely. They were told to feel free to ask for clarifications, repetitions, contexts and/or examples if and when they were not sure about how to answer a question. Participants were allowed to refuse to answer any question(s) without having to explain. In addition, they were assured pre-interview and reassured post-interview that they could veto any portion(s) of the audio-recorded information without explanation, if they chose to. When necessary, 'time-outs' (with the recorder on or off, according to the participant's preference) were offered, allowing the participant appropriate time to think and respond.

Participants from the main research sites were interviewed face-to-face at the time and place convenient to them while six participants from other sites were interviewed by telephone at the time of their requests. All but two interviews were audio-recorded. When audio-recording was not allowed, interviews were transcribed on the spot with an average length over 5,000 words. Two entrepreneurs were interviewed together as requested, and this was treated as a single interview/transcript. It is worth noting that it was not uncommon for participants to spend more time after the recording to give

detailed examples and less reserved answers to the interview questions. Given the revealing nature of such information, it was taken into consideration during the data analysis, albeit not treated as direct data (Kvale, 1996).

Because the research questions are rather specific and the nature of information needed was relatively straightforward, the interview guide was primarily developed based on the areas of interests (see above; Table 3.2).

Table 3.2 Contents Covered in All Interviews

	Main Interview Question(s)	Interview Protocols
1	What do you understand by 'obligation' and 'promise' in your employment relationship?	Ask one term each question; ask for examples; probe for further elaborations; seek to understand 'why'; explore perceived importance and binding powers of each term; seek to understand the perceived differences between terms
2	Who/what do you consider as the 'other party' of your employment relationship?	Seek subjective understanding/interpretation of and/or cognitive associations with the term 'the other party' and/or related terms; try to explore on how participants determine 'the other party'
3	Are there obligations and/or promises that are implicitly made to you in your employment relationship?	If YES, ask for examples and then proceed to the next question. If NO, seek to understand 'why'; explore how employment obligations and/or promises in general are considered made/offered; seek to understand employment expectations and/or perceptions/interpretations of any implicit employment terms; and, probe how participants feel about their employment relationships in general
4	Why do you think such implicit obligations and/or promises are indeed made to you	Ask for examples and explanations; seek to understand the perceived importance of these obligations and/or promises; explore how participants feel about their implicit employment terms in general

The guide indicated in Table 3.2 was developed through mock interviews and discussions with two colleagues. Note that the participants were not directly asked to

describe their perceived implicit employment terms for two reasons. First of all, it must be stressed that the study was not designed to be truly grounded, i.e., the research was informed by the existing literature that the psychological contract in the Chinese context is applicable with the precaution that the participants' perceptions might not entirely conform to the existing research (see Section 2.5.4). Following on from this, question number three (see above) was to minimise the assumptions of the participants' perceptions while avoid leading questions; it was to account for possibilities that participants might not be aware of implicit employment obligations/promises and/or prefer them to be explicitly made (see Cassar & Briner, 2009). Taken together, albeit the interview guide was framed in accordance with the literature, there was sufficient awareness of the potential to adapt the questions and/or questioning techniques if/when necessary (see Section 3.6.2). Consequently, while this research does not conform to the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), it allowed some space to explore and let certain issues/themes emerge and develop during the fieldwork. Accordingly, the participants' subjective employment perceptions were adequately explored during the interviews without pressing their accounts to conform to the existing literature.

The interviews (recording time) lasted between 22 and 98 minutes, with a mode that was between 35-45 minutes. Although the researcher generally asked each participant the same set of questions according to the interview protocols (see above), a balance was struck between getting full responses on every single question from all participants and more in-depth understanding on certain interesting issues emerged during the interview process (see O'Leary, et al., 2014). It was especially important for this study,

since a full research design was deemed difficult at the outset. Consequently, there were some slight changes in the interview approaches, although all interviews followed through the semi-structured approach. While major interview contents (see earlier) were covered by all interviews, the interview focus evolved as the researcher was getting better understanding of the phenomena examined. Generally speaking, the initial interviews were verging on the *relatively* structured, where the researcher was trying to get a holistic picture of participants' thoughts and responses on the topic. But the interviews were relaxed to a point of a dozen interviews, gradually verging on the *relatively* unstructured through the first half of the fieldwork (31 interviews). This was because the researcher had progressively more contextualised knowledge of the research settings and thus was in better positions to explore productively. As learning and reflections accumulated, discussions with supervisors led to a change of the questioning approach in the second half of the fieldwork (29 interviews). While covering the same interview contents, the interviews were opened by inviting participants to describe their career processes. The rationale for this was twofold. First, the career narrative presented a better background against which the participant' current perceptions of the employment relationship might have arisen and/or been changed. Second, it was in response to some encountered methodological difficulties that are discussed in later parts of this thesis (see chapters 4 & 8). The result was a well-balanced semi-structured interview approach, in that some structures were built up around the contextually/empirically informed areas of interest while sufficient space for exploration was facilitated by the 'beforehand' narrative career background of the participant.

In order to appropriately comprehend the participants' accounts, they were asked to provide details regarding their employment arrangements to the extent that they felt comfortable. These were noted in the interview record forms, research diaries, and sometimes audio-recorded during the interviews (see Chapter 6). Some additional ethnographical approaches were adopted in order to gain a well-rounded understanding of the research settings (see Appendix A), including 11 entries of different types of observations and 11 informant interviews (not audio-recorded). Important field-notes were recorded in the research diaries (about 20,000 words) and used as a helpful background against which the main research data were analysed. Before turning to data analysis in detail, the following section explains research ethics, evaluation and limitations.

3.6 Research Ethics, Quality and Limitations

3.6.1 Ethical Considerations

The research was adherent to the University ethical standard (see Hull University Business School, 2005). All interviews included standard pre-interview procedures such as gaining *informed consent* for interviews, recording, and data handling, publication, and termination; informing them about fully guaranteed *confidentiality* and their *rights to withdraw* at any stage before publication (see Appendix B). An estimated timeline for the whole research was explained at the end of interviews.

To enhance confidentiality, participants' particulars were recorded in codes and

transcripts saved by participants' codes as filenames (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). To fully protect interviewees' anonymities, they were given the choice to use pseudonyms to give consent, but all of them willingly provided their contacts for future communication if and when required. When quoted in the findings, all participants are quoted by their given English names. Other names, places, sensitive information and/or things requested by participants to remain confidential are either omitted from the quotes or replaced by pseudonyms. No participant had a request for special data termination procedures when asked at the end of the interview; none requested withdrawals from the research (thus far). Four participants asked for their respective audio-recordings and/or transcripts and these demands were fully met. Majority of participants (53) gave written consents; five by audio-recordings and three by emails. All participants were given the contact details of the researcher and her supervisors for any potential future requests/queries regarding their inputs; none has been received thus far.

One referred respondent, though happy to have a two and half hours informal conversation with the researcher on the interview topics, showed some hesitation to give consent. While the information obtained from this respondent was disregarded from data analyses for ethical reasons, the insights gained enriched the researcher's comprehension of the collected dataset. Throughout the fieldwork, the researcher was constantly reaching out for workers in different industrial and employment settings for informal conversations, whenever a formal interview was not feasible. Important insights were noted down in the research diaries. Not only did this serve as an ethical

measure toward participants, but also enhance the overall research quality, and it is the research evaluation to which I now turn.

3.6.2 Research Quality

The evaluation criteria for qualitative research differ from that of the quantitative (cf., Symon & Cassell, 2012; Easterby-Smith, Golden-Biddle & Loke, 2008; Bryman, Becker & Sempik, 2007). According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012), good qualitative research should provide ‘sufficient information to make an estimate of the reliability and validity of...methods, and trustworthiness of...findings’ (p604). While this chapter has strived for sufficient information transparency, some additional quality measures are described below.

To begin with, the researcher has prolonged engagement in the research context (see Section 1.1), which enhances the overall research quality (Creswell, 1998). Not only did the sampling strategy ensure the pre-existing trust between the researcher and researched, but also the researcher’s years of industrial research experiences ensured her active interviewing skills (see Holstein & Gubrium, 1997). Such skills were acknowledged by the supervisor who supervised a pilot interview, which served an additional purpose to familiarise the supervisory team with the present research settings. As a result, a long supervisory meeting (3 hours and 40 minutes) was held shortly after the pilot study in order to appropriately equip the researcher before entering the fieldwork, in addition to four supervisory consultations. During these pre-fieldwork supervisory exchanges, possible unfolding of the fieldwork were brainstormed and

detailed practical guidelines for sensible judgements and adaptations were discussed. Throughout the six weeks fieldwork, supervisory advice was constantly sought when necessary; in total, supervisory communication resulted in over 90 email correspondences, four remote supervisory meetings and five short telephone conversations (5-17 minutes each). The close supervision of the fieldwork, in addition to other measures, ensured the research quality.

Moreover, several informal discussions were carried out to ensure appropriate translations. These discussions were from 20 to 50 minutes, involving two BA English graduates, two English teachers, an American Chinese and a Canadian Chinese worker. All participants for these one-to-one discussions were born and working full-time in China. Brief explanations of psychological contract theories were provided in order to give them the correct contexts. Key English and Chinese terms used in the interviews are summarised in Table 3.2 (next page). Note that, in Table 3.2, no exact Chinese equivalent term for 'implicit' was found, but the researcher endeavoured to explain what was asked for by using different terms until the participant's understandings of the related questions were deemed consistent with the literature and other participants.

Fifteen participants, randomly selected, were telephoned to check the face validity of research findings (Patton, 2002). No major comment/disagreement was found. Nevertheless, limitations are inevitable with any research method (Whittemore, Chase & Mandle, 2001); the research limitations of this study are the matter to which I now turn.

Table 3.3 Key Terms Translated for Interviews

Key Areas	Key Terms Discussed
Possible Constituents of Psychological Contracts	承诺 ‘promise’ 义务 ‘obligation’ 责任 ‘responsibility’ 保证, 担保 ‘guarantee’ 期望, 期盼, 期待 ‘expectation’ 希望 ‘hope’
Employment Relationship	雇佣者, 雇主 ‘employer’ 老板 ‘boss’ 领导 ‘leader’ 经理 ‘manager’ 主管 ‘supervisor’ 工作 ‘work’ / ‘labour’ 劳动 ‘labour’ / ‘work’ 劳动者/劳动力 ‘labour’ 工人 ‘worker’ / ‘labour’ 被雇佣者 ‘employee’ 组织 ‘organisation’ 单位 ‘unit’ (see Chapter 1) 公司 ‘company’ 雇佣关系 ‘employment relationship’ 工作关系 ‘work relationship’ 交换关系/交易关系 ‘exchange relationship’ 金钱关系 ‘transactional relationship’ (monetary relationship) 关系 ‘guanxi’ (see Chen & Chen, 2004)
Nature of Psychological Contracts	表达清楚的 ‘explicit’ <i>or</i> ‘clearly expressed’ 没表达清楚的 ‘non-explicit’ <i>or</i> ‘not clearly expressed’ 没说出来的 ‘unspoken’ 没写出来的 ‘unwritten’ 心照不宣的 ‘by tacit understanding’ 默契的 ‘by understanding due to mutual bond’, ‘tacit’ 不用说的 ‘needless to say’ <i>or</i> ‘implied’ 心里清楚的 ‘know it by heart’ 就是知道的 ‘just know it’ 自己觉得的 ‘personal feelings/interpretations’ 就是这样的 ‘just like that’, ‘assumed’, ‘taken-for-granted’

3.6.3 Research Limitations

The participants of this research were largely recruited from the researcher’s contacts. It is possible that the research findings unavoidably inherit the biasness and limitations of

the researcher's personal networks. However, every effort was made to obtain a balanced sample. Related to this, there are limitations associated with the selection of research sites. To ensure the sampling strategies were effectively executed, research sites were selected among cities where the researcher had the most adequate research networks. These sites may not be representative of Chinese cities and thus the research findings, especially of chapter 6 and 7, need to be interpreted in context.

A potential source of criticism is related to the time of interviews. Cassar and Briner (2009) adopt purposive sampling to select participants with more than one year's employment experiences with their employers, arguing that the literature generally suggests that the first year of employment is critical to form psychological contracts. This sampling criterion was excluded from this study based on two arguments. First, psychological contracting involves processes, whose temporal dimensions remain unclear (see Section 2.2.3). A 'timeline for division' may seem arbitrary and thus risk losing important research insights. This may be especially inadvisable in the present research context whereby exploration was deemed rather important. Second, crucial insights on one of the fundamental natures of psychological contracts (i.e., idiosyncratic vs social) in the Chinese context may be gained by comparing and contrasting employment perceptions among employees with varied lengths of employment experiences.

Another potential source of error resides with the Chinese culture of face mechanisms and conflict avoidance (see Huang & Bond, 2012). Although no research or interview

questions directly concerned breach or violation (see Chapter 2), these were related by participants when they talked about their employment experiences (see later chapters). Because of the cultural preferences of social face concerns and avoidant approaches in managing conflicts at workplace (e.g., Peng & Tjosvold, 2011), participants seemed reserved in expressing their (negative) comments and emotions. Although the researcher further probed during interviews, the cultural impact on the collected data must be acknowledged. Data related to these areas, however, are not of major interest to this study.

A limitation innate to qualitative research is the subjectivity in analysing data. While this is arguably inevitable, countermeasures were employed during the data analysis process. The next section discusses the data analysis methods.

3.7 Data Analysis Methods

All interviews were transcribed at the earliest time possible and analysed by the template analysis approach (e.g., King, 2004; Miles & Huberman, 1984). As a type of thematic analysis, template analysis is a pragmatic tool for identifying, analysing and reporting dataset patterns (King, 2014²; also see, Cassar & Briner, 2009). The development to a final template usually begins with *a priori* themes, which ‘will be modified and added to as the researcher reads and interprets the texts’ (King, 2004,

² See websites designed by King for the template analysis community: <http://www.hud.ac.uk/hhs/research/template-analysis/> and <https://www.facebook.com/TemplateAnalysis>. Last accessed on 31 Jan 2015.

p256). When and how are *a priori* themes used vary among researchers (King, 2012³), however, since the present research aim was to examine four specific issues (i.e., research questions), it made sense to use them as four first-order themes (see King et al., 2003).

The next step was familiarising the researcher with the data by listening to recordings, referring back to research diaries, and reading through all transcripts while making initial comments and notes on transcripts (see Rapley, 2011). In this process, some see-do coding of data was initially done on the whole dataset (hard copies). Before formally coding data, an *a priori* template was derived from reading the literature and used as the initial template (Miles & Huberman, 1984; see Table 3.4 on next page). There was only one level of coding under each major theme so that sufficient scope for modifications was allowed (see King, 2014). The template revision process was through insertion, deletion and adjustment. An insertion was done when the researcher believed it was necessary to add a new code which emerged from the text. A deletion was necessary when a predefined code was found not adequately reflected in participants' accounts. An adjustment refers to a situation where the researcher needed to redefine/refine the conceptual scope of an *a priori* code, as defined by the existing literature, in order to better suit a theme emerged from the text.

³ See

<https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=4937394515304&set=vb.250910091703590&type=2&theater>. Accessed on 31 Jan 2015.

Table 3.4 Initial (*a priori*) Template

1.1 <u>Employment Obligations</u> 1.1.1 Social Schema 1.1.2 Individual Schema 1.1.3 Perceived Binding Powers
1.2 <u>Employment Promises</u> 1.2.1 Cultural Influences on the Meaning of Promises 1.2.2 Promise-Making and -Keeping Behaviours 1.2.3 Credibility and Perceived Binding Powers
1.3 <u>'The Other Party'</u> 1.3.1 Parities to Collective Level Agreements 1.3.2 Parities to Individual Level Agreements 1.3.3 Parties to Idiosyncratic/Other Agreements
1.4 <u>Implicit Employment Terms</u> 1.4.1 Social and Individual Circumstances 1.4.2 Organisation and Management Practices 1.4.3 Perceived Binding Powers of Implicit Employment Obligations

Although Braun and Clarke (2006; p82) suggest that 'a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set', implying frequency is not a major concern for qualitative research; as a general rule, codes with entry counts of less than five were not included. This 'threshold' was recently used by O'Leary et al. (2014) who studied psychological contracts in a non-traditional industry. Despite the authors using the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) for their data analyses, the threshold level for data inclusion was thought appropriate for this research because of their similar datasets (54 transcripts for O'Leary et al., 2014). Arguably, setting a minimum entry count helped make judgments on data selection and thus stay focused on major themes in light of the relatively large dataset. To remedy this and ensure important insights were not missed, all negative/deviant cases were highlighted and considered before finalising the data analysis (see Table 3.5). Other pragmatic issues,

such as dealing with uncertainty, intuition and hunches, were consulted with Rapley (2011).

Table 3.5 Steps of Template Revisions and Finalisation

Steps	Descriptions
1	A new set of transcripts was printed out and cut into text segments according to the four major themes, i.e., research questions (see Table 3.3).
2	The initial template was used to code 10 randomly selected transcripts (theme by theme) and revised.
3	The revised template was used to code randomly selected 20 of the remaining transcripts and revised.
4	The above template was used to code the remaining (30) transcripts and revised.
5	The above template was finalised by comparing against negative cases and the initial see-do coded transcripts.
6	Verify the finalised template by comparing it with all transcripts.

The rationale of pre-coding all transcripts and having a complete *a priori* initial template derived from the literature was first to resolve a dilemma, which was between the ‘openness’ and ‘pre-assumptions’ in analysing qualitative data (see King, 2004). The balance was achieved by the researcher’s sufficient familiarity with the text without being conceptually constrained by pre-defined codes, which allowed adequate beforehand awareness of the complexity of the data to have kept an open mind while coding texts with templates. The basic *a priori* template limited pre-assumptions about the texts, but provides appropriate structures to avoid chaotic and incoherent analyses.

The advice that an initial template is usually formulated from reading both the literature and transcripts is pragmatic, in the sense that analysing qualitative data is rather time-consuming and thus a relatively well-formed template at an early stage helps speed

up the process (King, 2014). However, the above data analyses procedures were feasible for this research because the fieldwork was completed at a fairly early stage. The first round see-do pre-coding of all transcripts was done during the 9th and 10th months of this study. The second round data analysis began in the 15th month. Consequently, time and (the relatively large) dataset afforded extra revisions of the initial template to enhance research validity, which was done after having thoroughly considered deviant cases and the initial see-do codes without needing to code and recode the same transcripts. In addition, analysing data manually by using hard copies and colour-coding practices is argued to be beneficial, especially for new researchers, to have a better 'feel' of the research data (Ryan, 2006).

Given the large amount of text, a cross-case coding approach was generally adopted; although this became problematic in analysing the data pertaining to the final research question (see Chapter 7). In general, the segmented text remained relatively independent for coding, but the sensemaking of the text relied heavily on holistically interpreting the entire transcript. Accordingly, despite that transcripts were mostly segmented into different sections pertaining to the four research questions, this practice was not rigidly followed during the data analysis. The actual analyses involved reading the whole transcript in order to understand a participant's meaning. The finalisation processes of the template required several attempts to integrate the findings of all sub-templates; albeit, except for the research question 1 (see Chapter 4), there did not appear to be major adjustments of the templates. Similarly, the actual coding and analysis processes were iterative and more complex than the indicated steps (see Table 3.5 above). In

practice, the number of times needed to code and recode the text was unexpected, involving going back and forth (I am tempted to say endlessly) on text and literature. The data analysis took over a year; some important reflections on the adopted data analysis methods are discussed in Chapter 8. Specific data analysis procedures adopted for different research questions are discussed in the respective chapters later. The following section explains some general notes on presenting data and findings, including translation of text, tidying-up quotes and organisation of findings.

3.8 Notes on Presenting Data and Findings

3.8.1 Translation of Text

All transcripts were analysed in Chinese and only selected texts were translated into English when writing up the thesis. The translation proved to be both challenging and problematic. Not only are there certain Chinese words having no strict English equivalents (e.g., see Table 3.2 above), but also that there may be potential loss of cultural connotations of words/phrases in the translation (Blenkinsopp & Pajouh, 2010). While word-for-word translation may be misleading (and in fact impossible), a free translation approach might reflect more the researcher's interpretations than the participants' own accounts. To strike a good balance between the accessible translation and the maximum preservation of the participants' meanings without having to provide large portions of interview excerpts for the context, two strategies were used. First, the context of quotes is explained where necessary in the findings. Second, besides supervisors, some personal contacts were individually consulted at the researcher's

discretion for translation, including four native English speakers, two Chinese PhD students studying at the University of Hull and two bilingual speakers (British Chinese and American Chinese).

It is important to point out that because it was usually required to discuss substantive portions of texts in providing adequate context for translation, the related discussions often served as validity checks of the researcher's interpretations. For example, during the early write-up process, a direct quote from Ken was translated as '*promise is completely useless*' (word-for-word translated as 'promise all is fake/false/unreal'). This translation was based on the inference from Ken's meaning. While those consulted were all in agreement that the initial translation reflected the participant's intended meaning, some of them expressed slight concerns for the level of translation accuracy. Finally, the translation that '*(Their) promises are nothing but fake*' was brought about; the selection processes and rationale are summarised below (Table 3.6).

Table 3.6 Exemplar Translation Processes

No.	Selection Alternatives	Rationale and Choice
1	Promise <u>all</u> is <u>fake/false/unreal</u> .	Word-for-word translation; meaning is unclear (also grammatically incorrect). Unselected.
2	Promise is <u>completely useless</u> .	Free translation; distant from the original semantic form; heavily dependent on inference/interpretation. Unselected
3	Promise is <u>all but fake</u> ; Promises are <u>all but fake</u> . The promises are <u>all but fake</u> .	The intended implication ('uselessness') is not as strong (also see below). Unselected.
4	Promise is <u>nothing but fake</u> ; Promises are <u>nothing but fake</u> . The promises are <u>nothing but fake</u> .	The implication in referring to 'promise' as a general concept could not be determined from the text. Unselected.
5	<i>(Their)</i> promises are <u>nothing but fake</u> .	Close to the original semantic form while the meaning is more specific with the strong intended implication. Selected.

The restoring process from ‘useless promise’ to ‘their fake promises’ was helpful for the data analyses: the former suggests the perceived value of promise, or lack of it, while the latter implies that the lack of confidence in promise-delivery was a result of the employer’s frequent lying/cheating behaviours and/or betrays. This implication led to the realisation that the related accounts did not refer to the participants’ interpretations of ‘promise’ *per se*, but rather reflected their employment experiences. Eventually, this realisation resulted in the judgement to ‘relocate’ the codes emerged from such accounts from the meaning of ‘promise’ (Chapter 5) to the implicit employment terms (Chapter 7) whereby the participants’ experiences were the analytical focus. While it would be false to claim that all direct quotes were translated with such calibrations, all of them were indeed thought through carefully in order to achieve the illustrated translation principle of balancing form, meaning and interpretation. A related note relates to the presentation of long quotations and/or dialogues, a matter to which I now turn.

3.8.2 Tidying-up Long Quotes

Most direct quotes used to illustrate the findings have been, to varied degrees, ‘tidied up’ for several reasons. First, the foremost interest of this study is the meanings and perceptions of the Chinese workers. Leaving a lot of ‘ummmms’ and ‘errs’ within the text may significantly reduce the readability and distract the reader from focusing on meanings. Albeit it would be helpful to illustrate the lack of flow in the participants’ narratives, this was judged not to outweigh the potential drawbacks. This is particularly so in the present research context that some participants had considerable difficulties in answering certain interview questions and the researcher acknowledged the responses

by an ‘enm’ sound (similar to nodding in this context, see later). Leaving the text as how it is in transcripts would increase the difficulty in translation while greatly decreasing the comfort in reading, if readable at all. Therefore, while interviews were transcribed as how the conversations were recorded, direct quotes were carefully ‘condensed’ after considering potential implications. In order to help the reader gauge how this was achieved, the ‘original’ (word-for-word translation) and the ‘tidied up’ versions of an exemplar interview excerpt are demonstrated as follows. When trying to answer whether ‘obligation’ or ‘promise’ was perceived to cover a wider scope of employment commitments, Sally replied:

Sally: The wider should be ‘promise’, maybe

Researcher: Enm.

Sally: Just, just like, for example, another thing I feel, just like, for example, that, err, leader, aiya, promised, say, that, err, how to say this, just for example, that, s/he wants, s/he wants to give you, just like, err, what is it called? For example s/he organises an event.

Researcher: Enm.

Sally: Ask you, just like, say: you have to go (see later).

Researcher: Enm.

Sally: And then, but if this thing isn’t within my work scope.

Researcher: Enm.

Sally: I may, just like, just to say, I don’t have obligations to have to

go.

Researcher: Enm.

Sally: But I may promise you: I have a look.

Researcher: Enm.

Sally: I may consider whether I want to go. When the time comes, it is up to me to decide whether go or not go.

Researcher: Enm.

Sally: So, I think promise is wider.

The above would be then ‘tidied up’ into the below:

Maybe ‘promise’ covers a wider scope of commitments...For example.....say the leader organises an event and tells me that I have to go...If this thing isn’t within my work scope...and I don’t have obligations to go...then I may promise to have a look...though it is up to me to decide whether to go or not when the time comes. So, I think promise covers a wider scope.

Although quotations like the above may still seem a bit ‘messy’, they reflect both the nature of qualitative work and the fact that these were not practiced talks. In general, direct quotes were translated in accordance with the following rules. First, the symbol ‘...’ is used to abridge redundant and/or unimportant/non-influential phrases. Second, the symbol ‘.....’ is used to indicate noticeable pauses. This way, some ‘brokenness’ of responses is still preserved to reflect the actual happening of the interviews. In addition,

emotional and/or behavioural signals captured by recordings and research diaries (e.g., laughs, sighs, etc..) are only incorporated into direct quotes if and when they were judged to convey significant meanings and/or contradictory messages to the verbally expressed.

Finally, because the semantic rules of English and Chinese are quite distant, most of the time word-for-word translation could not be understood. For example, in Sally's original quotes (see the highlighted above), a line was directly translated as '*Ask you, just like, say: you have to go*'. Although this translation could still be challenging to decipher, it may be interesting to note that a word was already added to the original sentence: Sally actually, word-for-word, said: '*Ask you, just like, say: have to go*'. This hardly makes any sense in English at all. While the first dilemma has been discussed in Section 3.8.1 regarding the balance between direct and free translation, a second difficulty lies in whether to put parentheses around certain words that had to be added into the quotes for them to make sense in English. Taking Sally's sentence for example, parentheses would be added around the word 'you', i.e., '*Ask you, just like, say: (you) have to go*'. In the first drafts, parentheses were added but not well received. It was perceived to be distracting, confusing or even annoying, particularly for the high frequency of usage. The need to regularly add parentheses was due to two reasons. First, the morphology of Chinese is distinct (see Packard, 2000); oftentimes certain words may not be needed depending on how the sentence is structured. Related to this, the Chinese language is highly contextual (and thus often condensed/compact) – possibly relating to the high context culture – it is often challenging for a sentence in daily

Chinese conversations to be appropriately understood in English without adding word(s) or context, or even both (also see Xian, 2008). Given that the researcher has adequate linguistic competences in both languages and the translation quality is judged to be ensured by the procedures outlined in Section 3.8.1, the parentheses are only added in the direct quotes to indicate the researcher's indirect interpretations. To conclude by example, Sally's original sentence that *'Ask you, just like, say: have to go'* would be translated by the above principles as *'The leader might ask you and say that you have to go'* or *'The leader might...say that you have to go'* (refer back to the original quotes for context). Having elucidated how data will be presented in the findings, the following section briefly explains the organisation of findings.

3.8.3 Organisation of Findings

The findings are organised in four separate chapters based on the final template specifically derived for this thesis (see Table 3.7 at the end of this chapter). While the four sub-templates are all related to the overarching research aim, they independently focus on the four research questions as indicated in the above table. To recap, the first research question aims to examine the level(s) of congruence between the Chinese workers' interpretations of 'obligation' in the employment context and its academically intended meaning. Research question 2 emphasises the theoretically central notion of promise and attempts to investigate its related behaviours in China. Research question 3 looks at the notion of 'the other party' and tries to observe its implications for studying psychological contracts in China. The final research question explores the implicit employment terms described by the Chinese workers in light of the psychological

contract. Since these research questions are related to different components of the psychological contract or its research, they are theoretically interrelated but conceptually independent. As a result, their findings are presented, analysed and discussed separately, with conclusions of contributions relating to their respective chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7. An integrated discussion of these findings, implications and reflections are discussed in Chapter 8. I will now turn to the first chapter of findings and analyses regarding the notion of ‘obligation’ in the Chinese employment context.

Table 3.7 Final Template

Research Question 1 (Chapter 4)	Research Question 2 (Chapter 5)	Research Question 3 (Chapter 6)	Research Question 4 (Chapter 7)
<p>1.1 Interpretations of 'Obligation' in Employment</p> <p>1.1.1 Legal Responsibility</p> <p>1.1.2 Implied Reciprocity</p> <p>1.1.3 Voluntary Commitments</p> <p>1.1.4 Moral Responsibility</p>	<p>1.2 Interpretations of 'Promise' in Employment</p> <p>1.2.1 Volition in Promise-Making</p> <p>1.2.1.1 Lexical Meanings of 'Promise'</p> <p>1.2.1.1.1 'Agreed to do'</p> <p>1.2.1.2 Discretionary and Discretionary Nature</p> <p>1.2.1.2.1 Self-disciplined Volition</p> <p>1.2.1.3 Taken-for-granted Implication/Intention for Promise-Keeping</p> <p>1.2.1.3.1 Action Orientation</p> <p>1.2.2 Morality in Promise-Keeping</p> <p>1.2.2.1 Informal Nature</p> <p>1.2.2.1.1 Unwritten</p> <p>1.2.2.1.2 Less Legally Binding</p> <p>1.2.2.2 Moral Binding Powers</p> <p>1.2.2.3 Subjective and Personal</p> <p>1.2.2.3.1 Credibility</p> <p>1.2.2.3.2 Personal Quality/Morality</p> <p>1.2.2.4 Unreliable</p> <p>1.2.3 Wider Scope of Employment Promises</p> <p>1.2.3.1 Nature/Quality of Relationship</p> <p>1.2.3.2 Flexibility</p> <p>1.2.3.3 Contextual</p> <p>1.2.3.4 Communication</p> <p>1.2.3.5 Beyond Basic Terms</p> <p>1.2.3.6 Broken Promises</p>	<p>1.3 'The Other Party' of the Employment Relationship</p> <p>1.3.1 Employing Organisations</p> <p>1.3.1.1 The Concept of 'Company'</p> <p>1.3.1.1.1 Concrete/Abstract</p> <p>1.3.1.1.2 Symbolic</p> <p>1.3.1.1.3 Difficult to Explain</p> <p>1.3.2 Organisational Representatives</p> <p>1.3.2.1 Immediate Authority</p> <p>1.3.2.1.1 Close Influences on Work/Performance</p> <p>1.3.2.1.2 Size of Company</p> <p>1.3.3 Others</p> <p>1.3.3.1 Different Interpretations of Employment Relationships</p> <p>1.3.3.2 The Dual Relationship</p> <p>1.3.3.2.1 Agency Workers</p> <p>1.3.3.2.2 Workers on Voluntary Positions</p> <p>1.3.3.2.3 Idiosyncratic Interpretations</p> <p>1.3.3.3 Diversified Employment Arrangements</p>	<p>1.4 Implicit Employment Terms</p> <p>1.4.1 Perceived Zone of Negotiability</p> <p>1.4.1.1 Nature of Employment</p> <p>1.4.1.1.1 Socialist Arrangements</p> <p>1.4.1.1.2 Capitalist Arrangements</p> <p>1.4.1.2 Employment Context</p> <p>1.4.1.3 Personal Context</p> <p>1.4.2 Societal Context</p> <p>1.4.2.1 Weak Legal Protection</p> <p>1.4.2.1.1 Normative Illegal Practices</p> <p>1.4.2.1.2 Poorly Practiced Employment Contracts</p> <p>1.4.2.2 Low Confidence in the Legal System</p> <p>1.4.2.3 Low Trust in the Employment Context</p> <p>1.4.2.4 Reluctance to Pursue Legal Action</p> <p>1.4.2.5 Unwilling Acceptance of Below Contract Terms</p> <p>1.4.2.6.1 Submissiveness</p> <p>1.4.2.6 Order and Hierarchy</p> <p>1.4.3 Leader and Leader Powers</p> <p>1.4.3.1 High Power Distance</p> <p>1.4.3.2 High Power Dependence</p> <p>1.4.3.3 Power Abuse</p> <p>1.4.3.4 Reciprocity/guanxi</p>

Chapter 4 ‘Obligation’ (‘Yiwu’) in Chinese Employment

This chapter focuses on the data collected to answer the research question: *How do Chinese workers interpret ‘obligations’ in the employment context?* The main finding on the notion of ‘employment obligations’ is that ‘yiwu’ (义务⁴) – ‘obligation’ in the Chinese language – was an ambiguous term in the employment context. While this finding is arguably profound, allowing the participants to have different interpretations of ‘obligation’ while answering the interview questions on their perceptions of employment obligations, it may immediately raise a concern for the data validity. Therefore, I will first discuss this matter.

It is crucial to note that the data included in this chapter may not be conceptually consistent with the notion of ‘employment obligation’ assumed in the literature. In other words, *despite being equally valid methodologically, these interpretations are not equally valid conceptually.* This is by that very fact both interesting and significant for at least two reasons. First, the existing literature in the Chinese context (e.g., Hui, Lee & Rousseau, 2004; Lee et al., 2011) and the indigenous Chinese studies (e.g., Li et al, 2012; Ma, Sun & Pan, 2010) using ‘yiwu’ in their research measures were not found to have reported or suspected different interpretations by participants. Second, it is rather intuitive that most of the time people tend to have a common interpretation of

⁴ Or ‘義務’, the traditional characteristics for ‘义务’, used in the Chinese version of CPI (Rousseau, 2000b; e.g., Hui, Lee & Rousseau, 2004).

polysemy⁵ (in this case, 'yiwu') in a given specific context (in this case, 'employment relationship').

It may help to also mention that, in the same light, neither did the pilot study, including a supervised pilot interview, lead to a suspicion of misinterpreting 'obligation' or 'yiwu' by the participants. Similarly, in developing context-sensitive questionnaire items in China, Lee, Liu, Rousseau, Hui and Chen (2011) have not reported any problem when they interviewed '30 final-year, parttime (sic) Master's in Business Administration (MBA) students...regarding *obligations* between themselves and their employers' (p209; my emphasis). One way to look at these is that the 'predicament of data validity' potentially has some profound implications for the operationalisation of the psychological contract (see Rousseau, 2011), at least in the Chinese context. Another, perhaps more interesting, perspective is that neither the present researcher nor any of the other bilingual field scholars expected that the semantic issue of 'yiwu' could be particularly problematic. Hence, the data has pointedly intrinsic value for careful analyses and further discussions, although it must be acknowledged beforehand that analysing the data to claim knowledge about 'employment obligations' according to its existing notion would be problematic. Because the participants' accounts were based on their different interpretations of 'yiwu', it would also be challenging to conceptualise 'employment obligation' in the Chinese context. Given the foreseeable conceptual

⁵ 'Polysemy' is used here to mean 'variation in the construal of a word on different occasions of use' (see Croft & Cruse, 2004; p109). In simplistic terms, polysemy may refer to words that shift in meaning from context to context and some may argue that it includes 'most words in ordinary use' (Anderson & Shiffrin, 1980; p331; e.g., *game, cup, eat, red, kick*, etc.). Interested readers are referred to the cognitive linguistic literature for an in-depth comprehension.

inconsistencies, this chapter is constructed to present the data together with the researcher's sense-making processes.

Consequently, the chapter is structured as follows. The first section offers a brief account of the handling of the difficult and differing interpretations of 'yiwu' during interviews and its rationale. The next section presents a snapshot of the long unfolding of the data analysis phase (13 months), starting from unawareness of the conceptual issues, a confused stage, an incidental discovery, additional informal inquiries to finally refocusing the analysis. At the end of this section, findings will be presented in the form of meaning clusters of 'yiwu' based on the participants' interpretations. Because the greater portion of the participants showed, though to varied degrees, confusions and inconsistencies in interpreting 'yiwu' in the employment relationship, the reader is reminded that the 'themes' (i.e., meaning clusters) are intended to be indicative. The third section discusses the implications of findings to psychological contract research before the final section which concludes this chapter and provides a concise answer to research question 1. I begin with an explanation of the data collection.

4.1 During the Fieldwork

All participants' accounts, regardless of how they understood the word 'yiwu', were equally explored during the interviews. The rationale for this is twofold. First and foremost, the related research question (1) is meant to examine *individual interpretation(s)*; the primary interest lies in the Chinese workers' own accounts of 'yiwu' in the employment settings rather than contextualising 'employment obligations'

in China according to the existing presumptions. Therefore, a decision to discourage some particular interpretations would be unjustified. Following on from this, all the participants' accounts were judged valid.

As a result, when collecting data relating to the main interview question that "*What do you understand by 'yiwu' in your employment relationship*", no definition of 'yiwu' was provided even upon request. Responses given to such requests were commonly either a repetition of the question, usually paraphrased, or by telling the participant that whatever their interpretation(s) was would be appreciated. In some cases when difficulties to answer became sustained over a prolonged period, personal feelings or even intuitions about 'yiwu' in the employment context were encouraged. In rare cases, simple examples ('the employer paying the salary' and/or 'you going to work on time') were provided to stimulate responses (see later). It should be made clear at this point that the conceptuality issue was unthought-of during and immediately after the fieldwork. Instead, I was greatly puzzled by some of the participants' manifest confusions, difficulties or even refusals in interpreting 'yiwu' in the employment context. As a native Chinese speaker, I have always been aware of potential linguistic implications of the related Chinese words (e.g., see Figure 3.3) which led me to a focus group as part of the pilot study and two supervisory discussions before and during the fieldwork in this regard. Notwithstanding these, I did not anticipate the ambiguity of 'yiwu' in the employment context. Nevertheless, the linguistic issues regarding 'yiwu' became quite noticeable after about 10 interviews, at which point a few participants had implied the perceived ambiguity or even immediately referred to it as 'free of charge', a

surprising but quite reasonable interpretation implied by 'yiwu' as an adjective that means 'not taking rewards for' (see later for further explanation). For example:

Researcher: What do you understand by 'yiwu' in your employment relationship?

Hannah: 'Yiwu'? You mean 'yiwu labour' (i.e., voluntary work)?

Researcher: Not exactly... In the employment context, what do you understand by the word 'yiwu' or how would you explain it?

Hannah: Simply 'free of charge'!

Researcher: Free of charge?

Hannah: Yes.

Researcher: Could you give me some examples at work?

Hannah: ...For example, say, my work is based in the lobby, my primary duty is to guide and help customers. I mean I might need to help (colleagues at) other positions when needed...But sometimes...those work may have nothing to do with you, but...you just go and help....

As indicated in the above, because such participants' interpretations of 'yiwu' in the employment context appeared consistent with the existing literature, i.e., as extra-role behaviours, the linguistic issue was thought to be methodologically interesting but conceptually inconsequential. However, with the next dozen participants, methodological difficulties were sustained and, in some interviews, even escalated. A

dramatic case in this regard involved turning off the recorder to allow time for the participant to answer the question that “what do you understand by ‘yiwu’ in your employment relationship’. Frank was an illuminating example (the first half is summarised for reasons of space; *italics* are directly taken from the transcript):

Initially, Frank felt the question ‘*difficult to answer*’ for him ‘*not having the expert knowledge in that specific area*’. After being ensured that only personal opinions were sought and no ‘*academic*’ or ‘*expert knowledge*’ was involved, Frank was still unable to answer. When asked about words that he could think of when relating ‘yiwu’ to the employment context, Frank again said ‘*it is quite difficult to give answers in this regard*’. The process of getting Frank to finally give an answer involved asking “*Would you think the company paying you a monthly salary is ‘yiwu’?*” and ‘*How about you going to work on time?*’ After about two minute’s break, the interview continued as the follows:

Frank: *For example, the company pays you to work here. This counts as ‘yiwu’? 【inquiring tone】*

Interviewer: *However you understand it would be correct...*

Frank: *Anyway....taking the company’s money and then performing the job duties. These are ‘yiwu’.*

Interviewer: *That’s very good personal interpretation. By the way, do you feel stressful talking to me? 【light-hearted remark】*

Frank: Nah, not that.... 【light laughter】 I feel like...if taking it literally, 'yiwu' is just "'yiwu' labour", not needing any rewards....But, after all, we take the money from the company...how to say, it is a kind of 'yiwu' but doesn't count as 'yiwu'.

During this period of the fieldwork, the first denial of the applicability of 'yiwu' at work also appeared:

Interviewer: How do you understand 'yiwu' in your employment relationship?

Ken: 'Yiwu'?..... I have no understanding of it in employment.

Interviewer: Are there any words you would associate to 'yiwu' at work?

Ken: Any words associated to it?..... I don't think about 'yiwu' when I work...

Interviewer: Imagine you had to associate 'yiwu' to your work, what would you think of?

Ken: "If I had to associate 'yiwu' to my work, what could I think of"?..... I still can't think of anything about it... I really mean it.

Toward the end of the original research plan (30 participants), another two denials similar to the above were encountered (Louis and Lisa). Although personal

interpretations of ‘yiwu’ were eventually implied (Ken) or explained (Louis and Lisa), these cases raised my awareness of the issue of linguistic ambiguity to a new level, not the least because all three were directly recruited through my close personal network and thus among the most cooperative participants. Yet, having been informed by the literature that ‘yiwu’ must have a prominent place in the Chinese employment, I ascribed the problem to translation and emphasised it accordingly⁶. By then, a choice needed to be made on whether the notion of ‘obligation’ in China should be further pursued in the following interviews, given that the data gathered were thought to be not unproblematic. It was decided that it should, not only for no study found in this regard, but also because I was still quite firmly convinced that meaningful inferences on the notion in China could be made – though probably more samples would be needed. This in part led to two decisions: a further sample was targeted (30 participants) and questions regarding ‘yiwu’ were moved toward the end of the interview, partially to avoid possibly undesirable ramifications. Similar difficulties were encountered in the second half of the fieldwork. Convinced by the literature still but becoming more conscious of the potentially profound linguistic issues, I completed the fieldwork and started the data analysis.

4.2 Unfolding of Data Analyses

The first round of template analysis was relatively straightforward. The participants’ interpretations of obligations in the employment context were mostly coded into

⁶ See Ma, G.X. (2014). Translation Issues in Psychological Contract Research in China. Presented at the NARTI 9th Annual Doctoral Colloquium. Keele Management School. June 9-10 2014.

'narrow scope of exchange', 'job requirements', and 'binding powers', some were coded into 'reciprocal relationship' and 'voluntary commitments' and the rest, typically confusions and inconsistencies, were coded into 'uncertain scope of obligations'. These codes were not perceived as satisfactory not only because they were inconsistent to my intuitions and the initial data analysis, but also that the template was not as effective as expected in interpreting the dataset. Against personal judgement and some field-notes, I (thought I) settled because the results appeared highly consistent with the existing literature in that most of interviewed Chinese workers interpreted 'yiwu' in their employment relationships as transactional exchanges with their employers while relational dimensions (e.g., extra-role duties) also existed (e.g., Lee, Hui & Rousseau, 2004).

I only became more sceptical when some slightly conflicting results seemed emerging from the revised templates for other research questions. The data analysis went into a stagnant period wherein all four sub-templates for the four research questions were revisited and revised over and again. Yet, coding and recoding the data did not yield very different themes because I was, quite unknowingly, still referring to the existing literature. It had been very frustrating because I intuitively 'knew' what the data suggested but for some reason the coding processes constantly yielded templates different from what were expected.

The breakthrough began with an incident when I was looking at the first order codes for this chapter side by side with the semantic meanings of 'yiwu'. As I then read back the

transcripts, it struck me rather as a surprise that the semantic meanings of 'yiwu' was apparently the most 'obvious' template for the data. It became apparent that instead of interpreting 'employment obligations' as a whole concept, many participants were first literally interpreting 'obligation' and then putting it into the employment context in a way that they found making sense. Brian was a typical example:

From the legal perspective, 'yiwu' are what you must do...so 'yiwu' in workplace are, too, what you must do.

Based on the above, Brian's "*personal understanding of 'yiwu' in the work relationship is just the job content signed in the contract*". In this data analysis process, the participants' confusions became the most helpful materials; because they signalled their difficulties of putting 'yiwu' into the employment context and thus were valuable in understanding their interpretation processes. It was then found that while all participants had clear understandings of 'yiwu', they commonly appeared confused or even showed refusals when they could not easily apply their interpretations of 'yiwu' in the employment. Victoria was the only participant who insisted that 'yiwu' was not relevant to employment, but her interview is illuminating:

Researcher: ...How would you understand 'yiwu' in the employment relationship?

Victoria: 'Yiwu'?

Researcher: Yes. How would you define or interpret the word 'Yiwu'?

- Victoria: I think there is no 'yiwu'.*
- Researcher: No 'yiwu'?*
- Victoria: Correct. I think 'yiwu' do not exist, because in the employment relationship, it is just that I work and get paid – no more, no less.*
- Researcher: You think these are not 'yiwu'?*
- Victoria: I think they are not.*
- Researcher: So what do you think that would be 'yiwu'?*
- Victoria: 'Yiwu' are just things that you should do without requiring rewards. For example, the 'Yiwu' Tree-Planting Day...*

It was clear that Victoria did not recognise obligations in employment as a meaningful concept, and her interpretation of 'yiwu' was perceived to be not applicable in the employment context, resulting in her complete refusal to answer the related interview question. However, most participants seemed to have 'come around' after the initial confusions and managed to apply 'yiwu' in the employment context. Among these participants, a major portion seemed to have interpreted obligations in employment according to their initial interpretations of 'yiwu', for example:

Yiwu' ...in the employment relationship, I kind of feel...it is not applicable...

In the context of employment relationship, it seems like... 'yiwu' cannot be used....Only when one is self-willingly to do something without external motivation, there is an existence of...yiwu'.

In further discussions, Lisa eventually explained that “*Only when you do things outside your own work – that is called ‘yiwu’*” and reemphasised that ‘yiwu’ only existed “*apart from your own work...and when you are willing to help others; it’s work not belonging to yourself*”. However, some participants altered their initial interpretations of ‘yiwu’ but usually with hesitations and in an uncertain tone. For example:

Louis: *In the employment relationship... .. I feel like, it seems like, ‘yiwu’ doesn’t exist.*

Interviewer: *So, ‘yiwu’ doesn’t exist?*

Louis: *Hmm..... performing my own job duties 【uncertain tone】 .*

The above is interesting because Louis later said: “*To my understanding, it seems like, in China, ‘yiwu’ refers to voluntary work... ‘yiwu’ are free of charge*”. It became clearer and clearer that the participants, or evidently most of them, did not perceive obligations in the employment relationship as an unambiguous concept but interpreted the notion based on their perceived semantic meanings of ‘yiwu’ (also see later examples). It was then realised that the assumption that obligations in employment was an analytical unity was wrong; it turned out that I should have analysed the data understanding that it was not. The coding approach became clear and relatively straightforward, which was basically a cluster analysis of the participants’ interpreted semantics of ‘yiwu’; these are presented in the following subsections. Note that the process of coding the below data

was both inductive and deductive, since by then it was sensible to use the semantics of ‘yiwu’ to help the data analysis. The reader is reminded, again, that for reasons discussed previously, the below are deliberately concise. Further analyses are explained in the following sections.

4.2.1 ‘Yiwu’ as Legal Responsibilities

The data analysis shows that legal employment responsibilities seemed to be most frequently implied or mentioned by the interviewed Chinese workers. The formal role of ‘yiwu’ in the employment relationship was also referred to by some participants as ‘noncompliance will lead to certain consequences’. The linkage between ‘yiwu’, ‘legal requirements’, ‘contract’ and the ‘formal role’ was best explained by Matt:

‘Yiwu’, as a noun, I think it is based on the law... ‘Yiwu’ may involve legal relationships..., noncompliance of which may lead to certain consequences... ‘Yiwu’ usually involve some documents. For example, putting aside employment relationships, the existence of ‘yiwu’ between husbands and wives is because they are married – they have the legal document. Similarly, the ‘yiwu’ between our company and us, too, are because we signed contracts.

Similarly, William elaborated ‘yiwu’ in the employment context as follows:

More detailed ‘yiwu’ are just what’s written in the contract when you entered the company – that’s your ‘yiwu’. It is not your ‘yiwu’ if it is not written (in

your contract). It is like you are only guilty when the law says you are and innocent when it says you are not.

A direct ramification of the legal implication of ‘yiwu’ is its bidirectional nature, since a legal contractual relationship usually defines the duties of both parties. This ramification was specifically referred to as “‘yiwu’ is corresponding to rights” by a few participants, which is actually written in the lexical definition of ‘yiwu’, i.e., ‘obligations are responsibilities that need to be fulfilled by citizens or legal entities according to legislations and laws (corresponding to rights)’ (see, e.g., Modern Chinese Dictionary, 2014, pp1540-1541). The reciprocity implied in ‘yiwu’ is a matter to which I now turn.

4.2.2 ‘Yiwu’ as Implied Reciprocity

Although the mutuality of ‘yiwu’ is defined in the legal context, a few participants used it as a justification of interpreting ‘yiwu’ as the basis of reciprocity in the employment relationship. For example, Ryan commented that “*The word ‘yiwu’ is corresponding to rights..., ‘yiwu’ refers to the kind of responsibilities accompanying the rights you gain at your position*”. In other words, to be obligated to do something, one must be entitled to gain something in return, i.e., ‘yiwu’ underlies a relationship that involves an exchange of commitments and/or values. Elena captured this neatly:

‘Yiwu’, I think, is just a value relationship between two parties and a relationship of mutual interests...For example, what values I contribute to and then what entitlements I gain from the company...To me, ‘yiwu’ is just

corresponding to rights.

In a similar light, some participants also mentioned that ‘yiwu’ were mutual. For example:

My personal understanding is that there must be a relationship between the employer and the employee based on the responsibilities and ‘yiwu’ which should be fulfilled; and these are mutually speaking, not referring to what should be done by just one party.

Joe

While the greater portion of the participants seemed to have associated their understandings of ‘employment obligations’ in line with the above two themes (both related to the primary meaning of ‘yiwu’), the other participants referred to the meanings of ‘yiwu’ indicated in the below two themes.

4.2.3 ‘Yiwu’ as Voluntary Commitments

The findings under this subsection were quite unexpected but, in hindsight, not really surprising. They relate to the secondary meaning of yiwu that is ‘not taking rewards for’ (Chinese Practical Xinhua Dictionary, 2013, p1080), implying *free of charge* and *voluntary*. Because these participants showed more confusion, alterations and inconsistencies in interpretations, many examples have already been discussed in the earlier part of this section. In furthering the earlier discussion, the confusion was also

revealed by some participants who later rejected their initial interpretations. For example, Yoyo initially thought: *“If...I am paid, then I am supposed to just help where I can or needs me. Maybe that is ‘yiwu’”*. When immediately asked to clarify whether she meant her job duties counted as ‘yiwu’, Yoyo then said: *“Since the employer pays me money,...the job duties should not count as ‘yiwu’ already”*. The confusion may be because that both interpretations, i.e., in-role and out-role duties, are plausible, though perceived to be distinguishable, notions of ‘employment obligations’. Susan’s answers to what she understood by obligations in employment provided evidence for this:

Researcher: So, you feel that ‘yiwu’ are beyond your own job duties?

Susan: Yes, that’s correct....It’s not called ‘yiwu’ when it is within your own job duties.

Researcher: Then what would you call it?

Susan: Within the job scope? Maybe I am a bit not sure about...the ‘yiwu’ you mentioned.

Researcher: That’s fine. I am only interested in knowing your personal concepts.

Susan: That’s ‘yiwu’ should be fulfilled – own job duties...are your own work ‘yiwu’, which must be accomplished.

An arguably related semantic meaning of ‘yiwu’ is the moral responsibilities, the last theme to which I now turn.

4.2.4 ‘Yiwu’ as Moral Responsibilities

The morality in ‘yiwu’ may seem somewhat ambiguous, but the moral aspect was identified in the data. For example, Aaron thought that “‘yiwu’ are not written in the contract...because those in the contract are the minimum requirements” and further elaborated that “‘yiwu’ is more like an enterprise’s social responsibility”. Several participants also indicated the internalised morality based on occupations, most visibly manifested among professions with strong social/professional norms and moral expectations; in their own words ‘li suo dang ran’ (‘理所当然’), meaning ‘completely within reason’ and ‘no space for any doubt’ (translated as ‘by principle’, ‘natural’ or ‘taken for granted’). Paul, a 48-year-old school teacher perceived ‘yiwu’ as ‘not needing rewards’ and ‘things you do naturally’. Paul said: ‘as a teacher, educating students well is within the own work scope. Striving for every student’s improvements and even solving problems encountered in teaching – these all should be ‘yiwu’, i.e., things within the work scope’.

The difference between this theme and ‘voluntary commitments’ is that the data regarding moral responsibilities of ‘yiwu’ showed two distinguishable traits: the participants regarded their extra-role commitments as part of the ‘own job’ and these moral commitments were mostly toward their serving populations and sometimes colleagues instead of their employers. The extended work scope was clearly seen in the interview with Luna, a 22-year-old nurse:

‘Yiwu’...are just...not requiring particular rewards for. It is what’s taken for

granted that you should do; and not that doing it because of rewards.... 'Yiwu' in the employment relationship is like I keep smiling when handling patients and trying my best to satisfy their every request and every demand – these to me are all 'yiwu'.

When asked whether she thought these were her '*job scope*' and '*own work*', Luna confirmed without hesitation. These data were not coded as '*social/occupational schemas*' because there was insufficient evidence from a wider range of occupational groups. Another reason was that there was no absolute agreement among participants from the same occupations. For example, Toni, another nurse working at the same hospital with Luna, interpreted '*yiwu*' quite differently: "*'Yiwu'?...I don't have too many 'yiwu'*". When asked for clarifications, Toni explained that her responsibilities were '*quite well specified*' in her '*job description*' which she '*basically just followed*'. Throughout the interview, Toni did not mention her patients but rather focused on the hospital.

The morally taken-for-granted nature of '*yiwu*' was also seen in a few participants' accounts of their roles in friendships and families, etc.. For instance, while not being able to clearly explain the meaning of '*yiwu*', Rachel gave an example as follows: "*Meaning of 'yiwu'?...It's quite hard to explain... You see for example, mothers must take good care of their children; they naturally want the best for them...*".

While the data presented in the above subsections may seem clear-cut, it is important to

note that oftentimes the participants referred to multiple meanings of ‘yiwu’, sometimes unknowingly. For example (my highlights):

Researcher: In the employment relationship, what would you think about ‘yiwu’?

Linda: It is work within my own scope, this is ‘yiwu’.

Researcher: How would you define ‘within scope’?

Linda:Take my current work for example, I am now in charge of administration, if you ask me to do the work regarding reemployment, I absolutely won’t do it – it’s not my work. But if there is a need, if others need me, I will help some....

Researcher: Do you think there is a difference between ‘yiwu’ and ‘promise’?

Linda: Erm...of course! ...‘Promise’...to me is that I agree to do something so I must do it. But ‘yiwu’ is I help you but do not need anything in return as a reward...

To help clarify the above, the confusion is probably that Linda referred to three kinds of ‘yiwu’, all of which could apply at workplace: 1) ‘yiwu’ with legal implications and thus one *must* do at work, i.e., ‘*work within my own scope*’; 2) ‘yiwu’ with moral implications and thus helping colleagues when needed (with a possible return of favour), i.e., ‘*If others need me, I will help some*’; and 3) ‘yiwu’ as voluntary commitments, i.e., ‘*I do not need anything in return as a reward*’.

These findings that the Chinese workers interpreted ‘yiwu’ differently in the same context and many felt/were confused when interpreting obligations in employment led me to three very naive questions that guided further inquiries in attempting to analyse the findings; these questions related to the issue of ‘yiwu’ as polysemy: 1) there are a countless number of polysemous words, in English and Chinese (I am tempted to say ‘any language’), why most of the time do people seem to have a shared understanding of polysemy without needing to specify the ‘correct’ meaning? 2) Why was this ‘automatic selection’ or the agreement in interpretations not the case in this research? And, 3) why did I, nor many bilingual field scholars, not perceive the linguistic ambiguity? By walking the reader through these naive questions, some thought processes in the data analysis are explained while a backdrop will have been set to tease out some insights from the findings to the literature and future research. I begin by answering the last question (3) of the above.

4.3 Implications of ‘Yiwu’ as Polysemy

The answer to the last question above seems rather straightforward: I had the *a priori* knowledge of ‘employment obligations’ (hereafter ‘the notion’) that formed some preconception, or cognitive frame, of what ‘yiwu’ means, or rather, what it should mean in this research context. This is to say, my cognitive frame of the notion enabled me to perceive it as a *whole* concept that helped me automatically pick the intended meaning of ‘yiwu’. Note that this implies the meaning selection process in this case was not merely an issue of linguistically translating ‘obligation’ to ‘yiwu’, but rather about cognitively perceiving the notion as a conceptual whole, both in English and in Chinese.

Following on from this, it seems reasonable to infer that people might easily relate to the intended meaning of polysemy in a given context, at least in part, because they have a holistic perception for the concept containing the polysemy, although it should be noted that the research on polysemy remains puzzling for cognitive linguists (cf. Geeraerts, 1993; Sandra & Rice, 1995; Fillmore & Atkins, 2000).

For example, when a native English speaker thinks of ‘river bank’, it is more likely that s/he first perceives it as a whole concept, after which s/he may or may not decompose it into individual properties/constituents (e.g., ‘river’ and ‘bank’). Such a holistic perception implies the existence of a cognitive frame for that notion (i.e., ‘river bank’) which may help people cognitively process the meaning of contained polysemy (i.e., ‘bank’). In contrast, the process in dealing with a notion for which there is no existing cognitive frame may look quite different. As an illustration, the below is taken from the research diary recording how a native English speaker tried to interpret the notion of ‘river of diamonds’:

Researcher: I know it is not really an English phrase, but what would you understand by ‘river of diamonds’?

Gilbert: To be honest, I have no idea!

Researcher: If you had to, how would you interpret it? What would you say?

Gilbert: I guess there’s two ways you could interpret it... 1) A river flows; diamonds are precious stones and a symbol of wealth – so an abundance of wealth! 2) Or as the old saying goes: ‘All that

glitters ain't gold', or 'fool's gold'...

As the above may indicate, while interpreting a notion for which there is no existing cognitive frame, people tend to understand it by first interpreting its individual (semantic) components and then integrating them by cognitive (or in this case, formal linguistic) rules (e.g., see Green, 1996); i.e., 'river' symbolises 'flow', 'diamonds' symbolises 'wealth' and thus 'river of diamonds' might be interpreted as 'wealth that flows like a river'. But if Gilbert were French, we would have expected him to have a different interpreting process – 'river of diamonds' actually means 'a diamond necklace' in French ('*rivière de diamants*'⁷). Understandably, the former interpretation process requires more cognitive resources and thus tends to be less certain, resulting in more difficulties, inconsistencies and/or confusions. These tendencies bear close resemblances to the participants' reactions and responses when interpreting obligations in employment. A reasonably logical inference from these discussions is that at least a considerable portion of the participants had no holistic concept for the notion.

One might argue for the possibility that these participants did have but different, and unshared, cognitive frames of the notion, resulting in different understandings based on their subjective interpretations of the word 'yiwu'. This claim might appear particularly appealing for the conceptual focus of the psychological contract, which is subjectivity

⁷ Note that the linguistic issues discussed in this chapter are more complex than the issue of translation as illustrated in this example (see Section 4.3.1). To the researcher's best knowledge, there is no Chinese word found to appropriately reflect the psychological contract phenomena, in part due to limitations of the existing literature (see Section 4.4 for detailed discussions).

and individuality. It would be, had the participants had different interpretations of ‘yiwu’ based on one of its meanings (e.g., English speakers could have different interpretations of ‘river bank’, but probably based on a shared understanding of what ‘bank’ means in this context). This was evidently not the case in the findings of this chapter. Further evidence from the findings that supports the above analyses may include that 1) the majority of participants found it difficult, to varied degrees, to interpret the notion; 2) many participants had confused, inconsistent and/or multiple interpretations; and 3) their cognitive processes in interpreting the notion appeared similar to an English speaker interpreting, for example, ‘a river of diamonds’. Nevertheless, the possibility should be recognised that some participants might have had *ad hoc* concepts of the notion that helped them appear coherent and consistent in giving the concerned information. For example, some young and educated male professionals in Xiamen appeared to have a belief that ‘yiwu’ had legal implications and thus referred to formal contracts (e.g., Brian, Matt, Jay, William, Jeremy).

In either scenario, it seems convincing that the participants did not understand the notion conceptually, albeit being able to interpret it according to – though might not solely base on – linguistic rules. Therefore, their interpretations of the notion may not reflect the true picture of *their (lack of) psychological reality/ies of obligations in the employment relationship or psychological contracts*. The former is related to translation, i.e., an issue over ‘yiwu’ and ‘obligation’; while the latter is a matter of operationalisation, i.e., an issue over ‘obligation’ and the psychological contract. I will discuss these issues in the following subsection

4.3.1 ‘Yiwu’, ‘Obligation’ and the Psychological Contract

Rather self-evidently, the findings of this chapter appear to suggest a translation inaccuracy between ‘yiwu’ and ‘obligation’, especially considering the secondary meaning of ‘yiwu’. Quite counter-intuitively, this might not be the case. For the convenience of non-Chinese readers, I first provide a brief background of the polysemisation of ‘yiwu’ from a cultural-linguistic perspective in attempting to compare the semantics between ‘yiwu’ and ‘obligation’⁸.

At the etymological level, ‘yiwu’ (义务) has two morphological roots: ‘yi’ (义) and ‘wu’ (务). The former has the semantic primitives of ‘righteousness’ and ‘community’, e.g., friendship, comradeship, etc.; while the latter means ‘matter, affair and business’ as a noun and ‘must/be sure to’ as an adverb. Taken together, it is then not very difficult to figure out the combined meaning - duties imposed (or implied) by righteousness and common good. Linguistically, ‘yiwu’ has a connotation of categorical duties, partially implicated by ‘wu’ as an adjective (see above). Culturally, this imposing property of ‘yiwu’ may be best explained by having a look at ‘義’, the traditional character of ‘yi’ (义).

The character ‘義’ (‘yi’) is composed by two sub-morphological roots, implying sacrifice and weapon, respectively. It implies the categorical imperative to fulfil ‘yi’,

⁸ This is not intended to be an authoritative account, partially because that there is no authoritative explanation/interpretation found in this light. The text here is, unless otherwise specified, based on reading a variety of Chinese dictionaries (including online versions) and some classical Chinese literature. Also note that the lexical meanings of English words cited in this subsection are based on <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com> (accessed on 23 June 2015).

which would go from one extreme (i.e., submission) to another (i.e., confrontation), when necessary. The below well-popularised proverb of Mencius (372-289 BC), one of the greatest Confucian thinkers after Confucius himself in the Chinese history ‘studied by all educated Chinese’ (Shun, 1997), precisely illustrates the categorical imperative of ‘yi’ in the Confucius culture:

Life is what I desire, so is ‘yi’. When it is not possible to have both, choose ‘yi’ and forsake life (my translation, from Mencius – Gaozi I⁹).

Bearing these linguistic and cultural implications of ‘yiwu’ in mind, I will now turn to its lexical meanings (see Chinese Practical Xinhua Dictionary, 2013, p1080). As a noun, ‘yiwu’ has a primary meaning of “legal or moral responsibilities that need/should be fulfilled (corresponding to ‘rights’)”. Its secondary meaning, as an adjective, may be word-for-word translated as ‘not taking rewards for’ (‘不计报酬的’). This secondary meaning is not commonly used in the daily language, mostly because ‘yiwu’ is primarily a noun and it is used as an adjective usually in some customised phrases. Arguably because of this, its ‘adjective’ meaning is usually interpreted by its implication in those customised phrases as ‘free of charge’ or ‘voluntary’. Most parts of these are consonant with the embedded categorical imperatives and the cultural heritage of ‘yi’: whether it is legally required, morally obliged or not rewarded for, ‘yiwu’ is to be fulfilled. From this perspective, there is not really a ‘polysemisation’ process of ‘yiwu’: both meanings imply behavioural compliances; the distinction is probably that the

⁹ ‘生，亦我所欲也；义，亦我所欲也。两者不可兼得，舍身而取义者也。’（孟子·告子上）

former emphasises the external drives (i.e., legally obligated and/or morally obliged) whereas the latter the internal motivations (i.e., voluntariness or volition). What might still need a bit of explanation is an immediate legal ramification of ‘yiwu’, which is usually put in brackets in its primary meaning by most dictionaries, i.e., ‘(corresponding to rights)’ (see above). The phrase that ‘obligations are corresponding to rights’ is a Chinese legal-political idiom. It is deeply rooted in the socialist ideology advocated by Marx, who promotes a justice stance that legal obligations should always be in accordance with the entitled social rights (See The Department for Translation and Edition of the Work of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin at the Central Committee of the Communist Party, 1995; vol 2, p137). This implied ideology in the primary meaning of ‘yiwu’ may explain its secondary meaning as well: those course or actions imposed by ‘yiwu’ are requested by the rights or benefits one has already been entitled in the society and thus should be fulfilled without expecting extra rewards. Accordingly, the customised usage of ‘yiwu’ as an adjective is commonly seen in fixed phrases, such as ‘yiwu’ labour, ‘yiwu’ performance, ‘yiwu’ military service, and ‘yiwu’ tree-planting etc., all of which may imply the socialist ideology. Though brief, this semantic orientation of ‘yiwu’ serves the purpose for now. I will attempt to compare these semantics of ‘yiwu’ with ‘obligation’, particularly in relation to the psychological contract literature.

Putting aside its cultural implications, it is not difficult to see why ‘yiwu’ is the Chinese equivalent for ‘obligation’. The primary lexical meaning of ‘obligation’, i.e., the condition of being morally or legally bound to do something, is almost identical to that of ‘yiwu’. The implication of ‘obligation’, in the infinite form, can be categorical, too,

especially considering its adjective form ‘obligatory’. The secondary lexical meaning of ‘obligation’, i.e., a debt of gratitude for a service or favour, may not be very far away from that of ‘yiwu’, i.e., not taking rewards for, assuming paying a debt of gratitude (in the English culture) would not normally involve expecting rewards and usually be internally motivated. Finally, from the psychological contract perspective, ‘obligation’ implies, or at least is intended to imply, a social exchange relationship: this seems in accordance with the implied reciprocity in ‘yiwu’. From this perspective, Rousseau’s (2011) advice of using ‘obligation’ to operationalise the psychological contract seems justifiable; for that at least one of its lexical meanings appears consistent with the literature in suggesting that ‘obligation’ indicates a psychological state of ‘returning the favour’, i.e., reciprocity, and thus a favourable term used in the social exchange literature (cf., Gergen, Greenberg & Wills, 1980). Even in the Chinese linguistic context, ‘yiwu’ implies a similar state, whether by its primary meaning of ‘moral responsibility’, indirect meaning of ‘corresponding to rights’ or the secondary meaning of ‘not taking rewards for’. This may be especially so given the cultural root of ‘yi’, which is deeply embedded in the Confucian values of people, relationships and community. In this regard, even the results of this chapter do not seem to reject these assumptions. In fact, even the inferred meaning of ‘yiwu’ as ‘free of charge’ could arguably be implied in the secondary meaning of ‘obligation’. For example, doing something for obligations to family may as well imply doing it for free. So, what is wrong in the translation?

Nothing really is, probably. The complication seems to be a historically promoted implication of ‘yiwu’ as ‘free of charge’ that is usually used in some previously

mentioned phrases. All of those phrases arguably imply the communist/socialist ideology; many of them are actually printed slogans through many medias (e.g., on the walls, posters, community notice boards or in prints, etc.), although such ideological promotions have been gradually reduced considerably during recent decades. This may in part explain that all the older interviewees (above 40 years old) – though they were not the only participants who – either mentioned the related implications of ‘yiwu’ (Lisa, Louis, Paul, Anna, Wilson, and Kitty) or showed significant confusion (Susan).

Assuming the social exchange scholars are not wrong for favouring ‘obligation’ and the translation seems appropriate – would it mean that the data and the analyses simply suggest a historical residual in the linguistic implication of ‘yiwu’? I will discuss this matter in the next section.

4.4 Discussion and Implication

The findings of this chapter suggest that the Chinese workers interpreted the notion of ‘employment obligations’ according to their semantic understandings of ‘yiwu’, commonly including ‘legal responsibilities’, ‘implied reciprocity’, ‘voluntary commitment’ and ‘moral responsibilities’. The further analyses lead to some interesting implications, which will be discussed in turn.

The first implication is straightforward and has been explained accordingly. The findings suggest that the participants’ perceptions of ‘employment obligations’ strongly related to the perceived meaning of ‘yiwu’, which is argued to have different

cultural/ideological connotations in China. This is consonant with the recent advice that the Chinese workers may not interpret some questionnaire items in the same way as their western counterparts. By citing Shih and Chen (2011) who adjusted the psychological contract measure in the Chinese context, Hornung and Rousseau (2012) highlight the importance of respondent's interpretations:

...factor structure...and reliability ($\alpha = 0.90, 0.93$ and 0.73 , respectively) of a Chinese version of the PCI were confirmed; yet another item from the transactional dimension had to be dropped...Deleted transactional items included perceived employer obligations to provide 'limited involvement in the organization' and 'a job limited to specific well- defined responsibilities', which appear to be interpreted differently by Chinese compared to Western employees (p330; my highlight).

The above is particularly suggestive for two reasons. First, the highlighted suggestion seems original, since the cited article only explains that:

Results of three-factor confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) showed that each indicator had significant and substantive loadings ($p < 0.001$), except one item ('A job limited to specific well-defined responsibilities'), which was removed from the transactional PC scale (Shih & Chen, 2011, p133).

Second, Shih and Chen's (2011) measure is based on Hui, Lee and Rousseau (2004)

who deleted the item ‘limited involvement in the organization’ from the original CPI (Rousseau, 2000) when they conducted the first empirical study in mainland China. Yet, this item is brought up in the reinterpretation of Shih and Chen (2011) – who understandably never studied the item in that research – to suggest different interpretations between the Chinese and western workers (see above). This reinterpretation seems novel because Hui, Lee and Rousseau (2004) did not seem to suggest any explanation in this light for dropping the 17 percent of the original items.

An interesting question to ask in this light would be that on what ground the loadings of items (from factoring analyses) may be judged to be ‘interpretation issues’ or to otherwise reflect the respondent’s investigated psychological realities. A crucial issue to mention is that an apparent congruence between participants’ responses and the literature may not necessarily indicate the conceptual validity of the data. This may be illustrated by that a significant portion of the text did appear to be consistent with the existing literature, i.e., transactional and relational dimensions, and coded accordingly, until the recognition of the problematic conceptual validity. For example, some data originally coded under the overarching theme of ‘narrow exchange scope’ of perceived employment obligations was later interpreted as largely reflecting the participants’ interpretation of ‘yiwu’ as legal responsibilities. To be specific, the following terms were commonly used by the Chinese workers which may be coded under both themes: *‘following company rules and regulations’, ‘job content’, ‘job requirements’, ‘job descriptions’, ‘within the work scope’, ‘my own work’, ‘what I am paid to do’, ‘duties attached to the job/position’, etc..* These could be summarised as, according to Penelope,

“Simply put, ‘yiwu’ are what should be done according to the position”. The issue in question here is that when the participants perceived obligations in employment as in-role duties and even refused to recognise extra-role duties as their obligations – would this necessarily indicate their psychological contracts to be more transactional than relational? The preliminary evidence from this chapter suggests that this may not be the case. I provide a couple of examples from the data below.

Jeremy was arguably the participant having ‘textbook’ relational psychological contracts who believed it should be the case that *‘for example, if the company sees...that I achieve a kind of performance or results, it will...gradually observe...my work for promotion...’* and explained that while he felt angry at a specific workplace incidence, he *‘wouldn’t leave the company...but...talk about this issue with the project group’*. Notwithstanding these relational beliefs with his employer, he clarified that *‘obligations are a kind of...mutual obligations and responsibilities based on the signed contract between’* him and the company and thus *‘for example, if I promise you to achieve something within the year..., it won’t be in my contract, therefore this kind of commitment is not my obligations’*.

Similarly, Elena appeared to believe that *‘obligations are perhaps the kind of objective thing...written in the contract and company regulations’*. However, she would still do work regarding the *‘company websites, including photo design...’* which were *‘thought not within the scope of obligations’*. Elena explained that she was willing to do these for several reasons, including *‘personal tendency to help when I can’*, *‘I am capable...and*

can learn from it, *'reciprocity, for example, you may also help me'*, and *'team working'*.

Again, despite a clear relational nature in the relationship with her employer, Elena firmly rejected the idea that these extra-role duties were her employment obligations.

To clarify, the findings of this chapter do not imply the existing literature in China is invalid. A more appropriate interpretation would be that the existing literature in China is likely to be based on the Chinese workers' different interpretations of 'yiwu' in the employment context; which in turn suggests a possibility in explaining the inconsistent empirical findings in the Chinese context (see Chapter 2). While part of the findings (e.g., 'yiwu' interpreted as implied reciprocity) may appear supportive to Rousseau's (2011) advice on using 'obligation' to operationalise the psychological contract, it can be problematic in the Chinese context because we do not know how exactly the different interpretations could influence the participants' responses and are yet to know that how, if at all, the employment experiences impact on individual interpretations of 'yiwu' in the employment context. However, these discussions provide evidence for Hornung and Rousseau's (2012) caveat issued against the taken-for-granted assumptions of the Chinese workers' employment experiences, and thus in the same light suggest that further qualitative and grounded research is needed (also see Edmondson & McManus, 2007).

Before concluding this chapter, there are two additional issues worth some brief notes. First, it would be interesting to speculate what if 'yiwu' had no historical connotation for 'free of charge': would the participants still interpret the notion by the same

cognitive process (i.e., similar to English speakers interpreting ‘river of diamonds’) or the reverse process (i.e., similar to that of ‘river bank’)? For the sake of curiosity, several British full-time workers were asked about what they understood by ‘employment obligations’; Sam’s response was a typical example:

Researcher: What do you understand by ‘employment obligation’?

Sam: It's things that you have to do in that employment that you are in.

Researcher: Why would you think that ‘you have to do’?

Sam: That's what ‘obligated’ is. It's a must, whether it's personal, work, religious. If you're obligated to do it, that's that.

The interest was not what the English speakers understood by the notion, but how: the cognitive interpretation process appeared similar to that of the Chinese. The possibility that ‘employment obligations’ may not be recognised as a specific concept by average English workers is potentially interesting, because similar to ‘yiwu’, ‘obligation’ also has two meanings. Although the difference is more subtle, the implication could be profound because using ‘obligation’ to operationalise the psychological contract seems to assume that participants’ responses do not depend on their interpretations of ‘obligation’; in other words, the meaning of ‘obligation’ in the research context is assumed to be unambiguous *and* congruent with the psychological contract assumptions. While it must be stressed that this would in no way imply a challenge to the empirical existence of psychological contracts, a significant reflection for scholars is that whether

the participants' opinions about perceived obligations to/by their employers appropriately reflect the investigated phenomena, especially by quantitative approaches (also see Sherman & Morley, 2015).

Related to the above, the validity of the existing operationalisations of the psychological contract based on 'obligations' may be impacted on from two perspectives. First, if 'obligation' was not linguistically unambiguous in the English employment context, or if obligations in employment did not correspond to a *single* meaningful concept to the English workers, the obligation-based measures might have observed different psychological realities. Following on from this, it would be particularly challenging to judge whether the captured phenomena were indeed psychological contracts, because it would be problematic to assure that the participants interpreted 'obligations' consistently to that assumed by the literature. While the findings and analyses of this chapter appear to suggest that the Chinese workers tended to relate to the primary lexical meanings of 'yiwu' in the employment context, it may be interesting to point out that a closer look at the findings of Cassar and Briner (2009), the only study found to have investigated the participants' interpretations of 'employment obligations' in the English linguistic context, might suggest something similar: their demonstrated participant quotes regarding 'employment obligations' showed remarkable resemblances to the first two themes of the findings of this chapter, i.e., legal requirements and implied reciprocity. For example (Cassar & Briner, 2009; p685):

Employment obligations mean that when you enter an organization your

contractual entitlements are made clear, regarding your obligations towards your employer and vice-versa. It's a two-way system whereby you know your obligations towards your employer and the employer needs to specify his obligations towards you (participant 14).

Interestingly, none of the quotes in the above study appear to suggest that Cassar and Briern's (2009) participants interpreted 'employment obligations', at least not explicitly, according to its perhaps more theoretically consonant meaning of returning a favour in the employment. Putting it simply, if we asked a naive question of what is the likelihood that an average English worker would relate their obligations at work *solely* to their perceived debts of gratitude for favours to/by their employers, the answer might not be intuitively optimistic; if we asked it from a more theoretically based angle and question what is the likelihood that the participants would perceive obligations in employment as *only* commitments elicited by promises that are exchanged, relied-upon and followed-through (see sections 2.3.3 & 5.3), it might be even more pessimistic.

While one might argue that the above seem too speculative and thus unconvincing because the discussions are primarily extended from data collected in the unfamiliar Chinese linguistic/employment context, it should be stressed that the fundamental argument for the above needs not to be based on empirical results. Essentially, although there is indeed an explanation of, or perhaps even an argument for, using obligation to operationalise the psychological contract, an explanation or an argument does not necessarily imply a justification. Since 'obligation' is not found to have been formally

defined in the psychological contract literature, it seems rather difficult to argue for the justification(s) of using it to operationalise the psychological contract. There is a risk, logically speaking, to operationalise a construct with an unjustified, or at least undefined, term, regardless of whether it being supported by empirical evidence. This is particularly so for the predominant quantitative approaches which are meant to be theoretically based and empirically tested. The fact that the existing literature has been, rather paradoxically, quite dependent on the empirical evidence is interesting and will be further discussed in Chapter 8; more relevant to the discussion of this chapter, it is worthy of a note that, without further research, it would be extremely challenging to propose which meaning of ‘*yiwu*’, or another Chinese word, to be appropriate in operationalising the psychological contract in China. I will now conclude this chapter and provide a concise answer to research question 1.

4.5 Conclusion and Contribution

This chapter has discussed the data collected to answer the research question: *How do Chinese workers interpret ‘obligations’ in the employment context?* The findings of this chapter show that the Chinese workers interpreted ‘*yiwu*’ – the Chinese equivalent for ‘obligation’ – differently in the employment context, including legal responsibilities, implied reciprocity, voluntary commitments and moral responsibilities. The analysis of data indicates that many participants felt difficult or even confused in answering the questions regarding obligations in the employment context, a result of which was the inconsistencies in text. It has been explained that while ‘*yiwu*’ seems to be a linguistically fair translation for ‘obligation’ in the Chinese language, its cultural and

historical connotations seem problematic for psychological contract research in China. An explanation for this was that though methodologically valid, the responses from Chinese workers regarding the notion of ‘employment obligations’ may not be all conceptually consistent with the existing literature. Further discussions indicate that a judgement on the conceptual validities of these data is difficult, at least due to a lack of formal definition of ‘obligation’ in the psychological contract literature. From this perspective, it has also been discussed that the validity of the obligation-based measurements is arguably questionable; in a similar light, Rousseau’s (2011) advice on using ‘obligation’ to operationalise the psychological contract is probably worthy of further clarifications/discussions.

Overall, the findings of this chapter provide indirect evidence for Hornung and Rousseau’s (2012) observation that Chinese workers’ interpretations of psychological contract measures translated from the English versions may be different from their western counterparts, as well as direct support for the authors’ suggestion for a need to understand the Chinese worker’s employment experiences from more grounded approaches. A reasonable conclusion from the discussions is that using ‘yiwu’ to operationalise the psychological contract in China may cause unnecessary linguistic complications. In addition, further research may be needed to understand the implications of using ‘obligation’ to operationalise psychological contracts in the English context.

This chapter makes three important contributions to the literature. First, it is the first

empirical study to investigate the interpretations of ‘obligation’ in the Chinese employment context and thus informs further studies in this light. Related to this, it sheds a first light on a potential explanation of why the Chinese workers were suggested to have interpreted the questionnaire items differently than their western counterparts. Finally, it suggests the potentially problematic validity of the obligation-based measures and a caution against the assumptions that participant interpretations of ‘employment obligations’ are equally conceptually valid and in congruence with the literature. On a related note, it may also be interesting to note that such assumptions could be so engrained that they misguided the initial data analysis of this chapter and perhaps also other field scholars. The next chapter presents findings regarding another important notion in the literature; I will now turn to the Chinese workers’ interpretations of ‘promise’ in the employment context.

Chapter 5 ‘Promise’ in Chinese Employment

This chapter focuses on the participants’ interpretations of ‘promise’ in the employment context. The data were collected by asking: what the participants would understand by ‘promise’ and if and how it differed from ‘obligation’ in employment. Partially because the participants’ interpretations of obligations in employment were different (Chapter 4), it was quite challenging to infer from the text the perceived differences between the ‘obligation’ and ‘promise’ in the Chinese employment. Since the previous chapter has already established that the participants’ interpretations of obligations in employment were conceptually problematic, the initial drafts fully incorporating the related data, i.e., comparisons of obligations and promises, into this chapter were perceived to be unconvincing; further relevant discussions are provided in a Section 5.3. Essentially, this chapter was refocused on the data of promise related behaviours, largely leaving out the comparisons to obligations in employment. Two higher level themes emerged from the data analysis: *volition in promise-making* and *morality in promise-keeping*. Although these themes were quite salient and thus the coding was not particularly difficult, I was initially confused by the seemingly conflicting text: the volition in promise-keeping was perceived to be implicitly binding for the person making the promise and thus suggests some levels of certainty, whereas the morality in promise-keeping was perceived to relate to weaker binding powers and thus suggests some levels of uncertainty (see sections 5.1 & 5.2). However, as I read back and forth on the text and the literature, the analyses became more in-depth; the related issues will be discussed in the respective sections below.

5.1 Volition in Promise-Making

This section brings together the Chinese workers' interpretations of promise-making. The data showed a convincing agreement among the vast majority of the participants who thought that 'promise' referred to something that they '*agreed to do*' (Jay) and implied the taken-for-granted nature of fulfilling promises. Because these appeared very consistent with the literature that a promise in the Chinese culture means 'promise to do' (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000), this data was initially coded under 'Cultural Impact on the Meaning of Promises' in the *a priori* template. However, it was found that 'promise' in the Chinese language (‘承诺’, i.e., ‘chengnuo’) has a primary meaning of ‘act according to what is agreed to do’ as a verb, and a secondary meaning of ‘what are promised to do’ as a noun (Xinhua Chinese Dictionary, 2013; p125). It was then discovered that there was actually no convincing evidence in the data supporting the notion that these interpretations were indeed impacted by ‘culture’, unless ‘culture’ here would largely refer to language. Yet, these were only realised after writing-up the previous chapter on ‘yiwu’; by then I had become more aware of the lexical meanings of terms and their potential influences on the data. Nevertheless, it should be clarified that it was challenging to judge based on the existing data whether the revealed taken-for-granted motivation to act on promises were linguistically implied or more a reflection of culture. This section demonstrates several commonly mentioned characteristics of promise-making behaviours perceived by the Chinese workers. Although efforts are made to present them as clearly as possible, these characteristics are intertwined and hard to disentangle. As a result, quotes selected oftentimes illustrate more than one code. Direct quotes are incorporated into the narratives of data analyses below while

additional group quotations are also illustrated where appropriate.

The most salient feature of promise-making is its perceived discretionary nature. This is meaning to say that promise-making indicates an autonomous choice that requires freedom to decide and implies a willingness to deliver, in that *'actually promise means that you may choose to promise or not...depending on whether you are willing to do what is promised.'* (Angela). The discretionary promise-making is commonly manifested as a self-disciplined volition to commit to verbal promises. Because promise *'is not legally binding...but...probably from the bottom of the heart'* (Caroline), there seems to be some internal binding on the person making the promise to honour what is promised, i.e., once *'you promise someone...you should honour it'* (Rebecca). This suggests that promise-making is perceived by the Chinese workers as implicitly offering a commitment from the person making the promise to act on the promise.

In turn, this indicates that promise-making is perceived to be both discretionary and discretionary; it implies some power to act on the promise that is expected not to be made out of spontaneity. The data analysis shows that most participants implied that a promise decision should be based on the likelihood of promise-keeping, which, in turn, was commonly weighed against their own limits of delivering the promise. Putting it simply, *'I make promises if I can do that; I can't make promises on things that I can't do'* (Rachel). Or according to Jack, *'having promised something means this is in line with your principles, so you will do it'*.

Therefore, this expected discretion in promise-making implies a strong intention to keep the promise, which means a promise is perceived as a serious matter because '*promised things should just be done; you can't simply make a promise*' (Eric). The Chinese workers by and large displayed some levels of solemnness in their opinions and attitudes toward promises, although it has been hard to judge whether this was, or to what degrees, due to social desirability effects (Ganster, Hennessey & Luthans, 1983). Some exemplar participants' interpretations of promise are as below:

I think promise means having to deliver what's agreed to do. If you can't then don't make promises to anyone. Anyway, I am personally quite serious on this matter. I think if I promise something I will just have to do it. I feel that if I can agree to do what is promised, I can do it. If I feel I can't do it, I just won't agree to do it.

Rebecca

I think promises are like this important to everyone....Because if you agreed on something...but did not do it well, that's your fault. You should have told me that you couldn't do it; you should have been clear as to what extent you could do it. But if eventually you couldn't do it so well (as you said), it means you have broken your promise.

Lisa

Promise is like you have promised and you've just got to do it. This is my

personal understanding.

Anna

Promise is that you only promise people when you have the means to keep it. If you can't do it, then don't promise; once you have promised something, you must deliver it. That's just my understanding.

Kelly

The data indicates a clear orientation for action on the promised commitments, i.e., 'make it happen' or 'do it' as well as the emphasised volition in the process of promise-making. Consequently, there seems to be a strong internal drive toward the delivery of promises; as Victoria put it:

Promise is something that you must do because you have obligated yourself by the willingness to promise. If you are unwilling to do something, then don't promise to do it; but once promised, just do it.

Nevertheless, the nature of this internal drive is hard to define, which is almost self-sufficient in that it 'feels like I have promised you this thing, so I just have to make it happen' (Linda), or 'since you have promised, right? You just got to do it' (Simon).

The motivation to commit toward a promise, thus, seems to be largely taken for granted, with a likely reasoning sequence as follows:

I made a choice to agree to do something. Because the choice is both voluntary and thought through, that makes it a promise. Therefore, I should (try my best to) honour it.

The data analysis shows that the majority of participants' accounts appeared consistent with this reasoning and inclines me to conclude that for Chinese workers by agreeing to make a promise, the person making the promise also implicitly obligates him/herself to the realisation of the promise. In short, the data discussed in this section suggest a strong normative belief among the participants that a promise implies an agreement which is usually expected to be made consciously and willingly. The data analysis also suggests that the volition in making a promise seems to be perceived as signifying the intention to keep it (at least when it is made). At the very least, the data in this section shows that promise-making is likely to generate some strong internal impetus towards promise-keeping. The largely taken for granted nature of promise-keeping discussed in this section implies an element of morality being associated with promises, which was saliently revealed in the text relating to promise-keeping.

5.2 Morality in Promise-Keeping

This section explains the data on the perceived morality in promise-keeping. The first-order code of 'Credibility and Perceived Binding Powers of Employment Promises' in the *a priori* template was eventually coded/modified as secondary codes under this section because the perceived binding powers of promises were hard to determine from the data. While the previous section has shown that promises were highly binding by the

majority of participants; this section will show that they were also perceived to be uncertain. The in-depth data analysis revealed that the uncertain binding powers of promises related to the inherent morality of promises, which made promise-keeping rather contextual and relating to individual qualities (see later). This gave rise to the theme of this section on morality in promise keeping, including three of its features, i.e., the informal nature of promises in the employment context, the morality of promises and the contexts of promise-keeping behaviours.

In general, the data analysis shows that promises were perceived to be informal in the employment context because they were most likely to be oral; this was particularly revealed when the participants answered the question on the perceived differences between promises and obligations in employment¹⁰. For example, in Jason's words, *'promises seem to be just oral, or feel like that'*; or according to Sara, promises *'probably won't be written on the paper'*. However, this did not seem to mean that promises could not be in written forms, albeit less likely. For example, Elena thought *'promises could be in written forms, but oftentimes they are more likely to be oral promises'*. In turn, oral promises seemed to be interpreted as informal and thus more flexible/individual but less legally binding. For example:

Promises are uncertain because they are oral...It means that they are not that formal or binding...They may be conditional...and cancelled later...

¹⁰ For reasons discussed previously, the data directly relating to obligations in employment are not included in the direct quotes of this chapter.

Sally

Promises are not based on laws and thus more flexible. Sometimes they may not be fulfilled.

Matt

Promises are legally less binding. They tend to be offered by individuals; more individual...and personal.

Aaron

Because ‘*promises are not written on the paper so that you can’t take it to a formal level*’ (Jeremy), they were perceived to be more binding from a moral perspective. This perceived morality in promises was largely implied by almost all the participants, while some participants explicitly explained in this light. For example, William thought the binding powers of ‘*promises are...considered from the moral angle*’ (also see later). While the data analysis convincingly suggests that promises imply morality, its moral binding powers seemed to vary across participants or contexts. Some participants believed or implied that the moral binding powers of promises were strong, regardless of the promise’s forms or contexts. For example:

Promise has moral binding powers, for that ‘promise’ is what you have agreed to, no matter whether it is written or verbal...Since you have promised others, you just ought to fulfil (it)...From the moral perspective,

you have promised so you just must fulfil it.

Brian

Promises are, regardless of being in the employment relationship or not, things that I have verbally promised and thus must be accomplished.

Yoyo

More commonly, the binding powers stemmed from morality were perceived to be less mandatory, as Jay put it: *'promises only mean I have agreed to do something for you. If I could not fulfil the promise, for example, there would only be the kind of moral bindings...For example, I had promised, but I couldn't fulfil it – this would only imply my bad morality'*. It may help to clarify that the morality of promises was never actively probed for during the interviews, albeit occasionally the binding powers of promises were explored but usually only by follow-up questions relating to the participants' previous direct answers to their interpretations of promises in employment.

The relatively less binding powers of promises were particularly revealed when compared to legal commitments, in that the nonfulfillment of promises was not perceived as consequential. According to Jonathan:

The binding powers of promises...feel like probably from the moral perspective...or are judged by a person's...credibility. It should not involve legal implications... For example, if someone promised but later did not

fulfil the promise, there would not seem to be any mandatory procedures to enforce it.

As Jonathan suggested, because promises are not legally binding, in reality their levels of reliability were thought to relate to issues such as trust, credibility, honour or even faith. For example:

Promise is absolutely related to faith (his own English word), trust...and credibility...And, talking about promise, this is the most basic...quality...If you don't keep promises with others at work, you certainly won't obtain trust.

James

Promises are like, somehow related to what we call honour and credibility...Promise is like, I promise you that I must do something...If I don't fulfil it within a certain period...I will have no credibility because I don't honour the original agreement.

Lisa

If you can't keep your promises, you are just playing with others, that's just stringing them along, and you will have no credibility.

Kelly

Since morality and its related issues indicated above are arguably more subjective and personal, several participants explicitly commented that the reliability of promises resided with the person who made it. For example, according to Jason, the binding powers of promises *'depend on the person – it has binding powers if the person has some sense of responsibility'*. Similarly Sara thought that promises *'are perhaps a kind of more abstract commitment, relating more to your personal quality, sort of morality'*; Joe believed that promises *'relate to the issues of a person's morality and credibility; it is more subjective'*. In summary, the codes emerged from this section may be well captured by Matt who commented on promises in the employment context as below:

You may or may not fulfil a promise; it all depends on the individual...Promises are verbal, meaning there is no legal binding power...thus no consequences for inaction on it...It is only a matter of personal credibility...or a promise relationship depending on trust toward each other in the mutual relationship.

This section shows that the binding powers, and thus the reliability, of promise were perceived to be moral and thus contextual. It should be clarified again that the morality and the related issues identified above were not actively asked for during the interviews. Most of the data were the participants' direct answers to the interview questions on their interpretations of promises, especially in comparison to obligations, some of which were further probed. The data suggested that promises in the employment context were thought to be informal and thus their fulfilments depended on the morality and the

related issues of the person making the promise. It has also been explained that one result of these was the perceived flexibility and individuality of promises at work, which may be related to their wider scope in terms of employment exchanges. The perceived scope of promises in the employment context is the theme to which I now turn.

5.3 Wider Scope of Employment Promises

The theme of ‘scope of employment exchanges’ emerged during the interviews, especially when the participants tried to compare promises and obligations. Understandably, most of the data included in this section were collected by discussions with the participants on the scope of promises and obligations. As a result, the reader is reminded that the following participants’ accounts may have been affected by their different interpretations of obligations in employment, although the data analysis has taken these factors into account. Accordingly, this section is construed as extended analyses of the above (sections 5.1 & 5.2), though the below findings may remain indicative.

The data analysis suggests that the perception of promises at work beyond the employment contract was probably based on a perceived ‘good’ relationship, although how the ‘good’ should be judged was harder to infer. Such promise-based relationships could also exist between colleagues, e.g., *‘promises are things you are not required to do, but you...may promise your colleagues...and/or leaders to do it’* (Jeffery). In addition, such data appears relatively consistent with the traits of promise behaviours

discussed in the first two sections of this chapter. According to Nicolas:

Promises are things out of the job duties, i.e., beyond the work attached to job roles...because promises...are more about a kind of personal relationship...For example, my relationship with this colleague is not bad and I am asked for a favour; then I tell the colleague that I will help to do this thing..This is my promise; I must do the promised thing which is due to my own willingness...Or if the boss asks me to develop a new programme which is out of my job scope, I will see whether I can promise in regard to my own capabilities.

Moreover, the wider scope of employment promises may relate to the idea that the promise-relationship could be purposeful, involving a relationship of interest, or in Angela's words, promises '*include the things you want to do, possibly for...a kind of...interest...although for some people...promises are made because of a kind of...relationship, such as friendship or kinship*'. The data analysis shows that promises may likely be perceived as an outcome of a process involving being asked and having agreed to do something, which implicitly describes the perceived communication (though possibly unsophisticated in nature) in promise-related behaviours. This communication seems particularly necessary given that promises were considered as beyond the fixed job duties and thus more flexible. These were concisely explained by Brian as follows:

Promises are communicated beforehand regarding things you agree to do for other people....In the employment relationship, promises are not what the employee has to do because of the company regulations; promises are...mutual agreements which I think involve a communication process in advance.

Because of the likely communication involved and their flexibility, the actual employment promises were perceived to be *'depending on the situation and there is no way'* to generalise (Angela). According to Caroline, *'there is no way to describe detailed promises, because they vary according to different periods of work...although according to our thoughts, promises relate to those things beyond the company required duties'*. The variability of employment promises also seemed to be profession related. For example, salespeople talked about extra sales targets (e.g., Sara, James and Angela) and teachers gave examples regarding handling classes and students (e.g., Nicolas, Kitty and William). However, as the majority of the participants found it difficult to think of specific examples except explaining a little about their own work and how promises were similar but *'extra'* duties, it was very challenging to elaborate the largely unelaborated accounts in the data analysis.

Related to the above, the data analysis also implies that perceptions of employment promises relate to levels of expectations at work. According to Sara:

On this kind of thing (i.e., employment promises), actually everyone's

requirements may be different. I personally think it's more or less fine, so long as mine are not worse than other people's. You can't request too much, because your capabilities must be up to the standard to what you 'request' for.

In emphasising that promises were beyond the basic work requirements, Sara also stressed the essentiality in fulfilling basic employment duties before talking about 'promises': *'if, say, you couldn't fulfil these basic company requirements...and then negotiated with the company for something extra..., it'd actually be very irrational...and very unrealistic...'*. Accordingly, the perception of self-performance at work seemed to influence the perceptions of employment promises, although this was considerably implied, partially by a strong tendency of giving examples of the employer's broken promises by those participants who appeared to be more qualified for their jobs. For example, Sally worked as a supervisor at an amusement park run by a public company and used an analogy for the promises at work: *'it is like, when you were interviewed they gave you (a promise of) a big cake, but it turned out not like that'*. Stephanie was a telephonist at a stated-owned company and commented that *"it seems like these promises all get 'discounted' at the end"*. It may also be interesting to note that even when no actual broken promises were mentioned, Jonathan, who had only joined his then employer for less than six months, still gave a hypothesised example in its broken form:

For example, if I was told that I would get a promotion providing having

achieved the performance target by the end of the month, then subsequently, I achieved the target but for some reason...I was not promoted. This is a kind of promise.

While the data analysis suggests that those broken promises were also perceived to have covered more than the contract terms, it should be clarified that the contracted obligations in the Chinese employment context could be extremely basic or even neglected by both parties of the employment (see later and Chapter 7). I will discuss the findings of this chapter in the next section.

5.4 Discussion and Implication

Contrary to the critical voices from both theoretical (e.g., Bankins, 2010) and empirical (e.g., Roehling, 2008; Montes & Zweig, 2009) psychological contract research, the findings of this chapter seem largely in accordance with Rousseau's (1995; 2001) explanations on the notion of promise and partially support the assumed utility of promise in the psychological contract. Rousseau's (1995) reasoning that freedom to choose is a critical prerequisite for promise-making and 'motivationally, having a choice can engender a great personal commitment to carry out a promise' (p17) were markedly supported by the data on the perceived volition in promise-making. Similarly, the suggested flexibility, morality, individuality, sensitivity to contexts and thus the values of promise in contracts (Rousseau, 1995) were also, to varied degrees, supported by the findings. Given the relatively large sample that were purposely selected to maximise contextual varieties, the remarkable similarities in the participant perceptions gives an

indication, at its very least, that the fundamental assumption of promise underpinning the psychological contract theory is probably applicable in Chinese societies.

Since, from the psychological contract perspective, promise is at the centre of the creation of a contract that ‘hinges on the belief that an agreement exists’ and ‘communication is the essence of promise’ (Rousseau, 1995, p20), the findings also support these promise-related suppositions which would appear particularly appropriate in the Chinese linguistic context. Since ‘chengnuo’ (i.e., ‘promise’) literally means ‘agree to do’, it is interesting to point out that there is an inherent agreement and thus communication element attached to the lexical meaning(s) of promise in the Chinese language. These linguistic implications might arguably explain the largely taken for granted nature of promise-keeping, in which light it might be interesting to point out that none of the participants mentioned personal conscience having a big part in keeping a promise. From the empirical perspective, the linguistic or cultural interpretations of promises may provide an alternative explanation for the seemingly different phenomena of psychological contracts in the Chinese context (Hornung & Rousseau, 2012); and thus suggest more grounded research of psychological contracts in China. More importantly, the Chinese linguistic context of promise, or what may be argued as the cultural meaning of ‘promise to do’ (see Rousseau & Schalk, 2000), brings about some interesting discussions on promises and psychological contracts (see below).

5.4.1 Cultural/Linguistic Meanings of Promise in China

The promise beliefs by the participants seem to be more consonant with a particular

type of promise in the psychological contract literature, i.e., warrantee (Rousseau, 1995). Warrantees, unlike promises that result from ‘commissive speech’¹¹, are the results of the ‘assertive speech (that) commits the speaker to something’s being the case’, while both ‘are fundamental to the formation of psychological contracts’ (Rousseau, 2001, p526). Examples of plausible implicit warrantees given by Rousseau (1995) include safety of medicines and job content as implied by the job title (p16). The principal difference between warrantees and promises is that the former emphasises facts and the latter future intentions (see Rousseau, 1995; 2001). Consequently, Rousseau (1995) argues that promises as warrantees are more certain and less ambiguous. In accordance with this assumption, the value or practicability of promises in the Chinese context, either linguistically imposed or culturally inscribed (or both), seems to hinge on the controllability or certainty of promise, such as the essentiality of fulfilling basic employment obligations and improve self-performance; or the level of dependability of promise-maker’s action or commitment, such as the emphasis on the evaluation on morality-related issues as well as the individual relationship with the person making the promise.

In drawing a comparison, indications of promises as ‘future intentions’ were more commonly dismissed by the participants than not. For example, Ken talked about an incident whereby the head of his branch personally spoke to him when the branch was under a lot of pressure to achieve its annual targets:

¹¹ ‘Commissive speech’ is a specific term used in the speech act (see Section 2.3.3); commissive promises refer to verbal statements committing the speaker to future actions (see Rousseau, 1995; 2001).

He said to me: 'the central branch has issued two notices to transfer you to another branch but I disagreed and argued to have kept you here'. He then said to me that 'I hope you keep performing well here – show me some good sales results' and... 'if your performance is remarkable, you know... '.

Although Ken's leader did not finish the sentence, Ken knew, if he did well in helping the leader to achieve the target, *'there would be something good'* for him. However, when asked whether he felt it was a kind of promise, Ken said:

Honestly, I did not take it as a kind of promise....I did think at the time that there might be some kind of usable elements for me in this thing (e.g., for later negotiations), but I...did not take it as a promise....I just smiled – I knew exactly his purpose of speaking to me which was to get me achieve the target for him.

When discussing this incident with several other participants, most of them had similar perceptions, i.e., they acknowledged the implicit future intentions of the leader and indicated expectations for reciprocation, but rarely such expectations were recognised as promises. An illuminating example was Jay who gave an immediate 'No' to the possibility of an implied promise in the incident, although he *'of course would have expectations'*. Jay explained:

If he did not clearly...express that 'I will give you something if you achieve

a specific target' ...it is possible that he never wanted to give you that 'something'But if originally...he had an agreement with you, regardless of being oral or written...it's then a kind of promise.

Jay suggested that he would *'feel bereft'* if it was a failed expectation, which *'may or may not'* lead to his loss of trust to the employer. However, if the leader (was perceived to have) made a promise in the above example and then broke it, he would feel *'hugely bereft...and have a feeling of being deceived'*. From this perspective, Rousseau's (1995; see later) assumption on failed expectations and broken promises seems to be at least partially supported, too. From a different perspective, the participants' strong negative sentiments toward and losing trust in the employment relationship revealed by the findings imply stronger support for Rousseau's (1995) suggestion that warranties, compared with future intentions, 'generate a strong sense of bad faith' when breached (p16). Although future research is needed to investigate how these cultural/linguistic meanings of promise in China may impact on the psychological contract, these discussions lead to some interesting reflections on the existing literature that will be discussed in the following two sub-sections.

5.4.2 Meanings of Promise and the Psychological Contract

To begin with, a promise in English may mean 'a spoken or written assurance made to another, a commitment made to one's self, or conditions that create expectations on the part of another' (Oxford English Dictionary, cited by Rousseau, 2001, p525). Unlike 'chengnuo', its Chinese equivalent whose meanings appear more univocal and thus less

ambiguous (i.e., ‘agree to do’), promise in the western context may imply different levels of psychological engagements (e.g., see Roehling, 2008). Bankins (2014) reviews the definitions of promise from a cross-disciplinary perspective, including law, philosophy/morality and the speech act. Based on the literature she surveyed as well as other scholars’ discussions (e.g., Rousseau, 1995; 2001; Roehling, 2008), there does not seem to be a universal understanding of promise, despite the fact that there may be several features in common (see Bankins, 2014, pp551-552). While the different understandings of promise and the implications for empirical research have been discussed (e.g., cf., Conway & Briner, 2005) and claimed to be tested (e.g., Roehling, 2008), the rigorous definitions of psychological contract promises have been insofar largely neglected in both discussions and empirical research. To elaborate, Rousseau’s (1995) conception of contractual promises in justifying their stronger binding powers than expectations includes, for example, an elucidation that (p17):

A gray (sic) area between unattended-to and relied-upon contracts occurs when there has been emotional reliance but behaviors have not yet been affected by a promise. If raises have been promised, but a department’s budget is cut, employees suffer disappointment but may not as yet have gone out and spent their promised pay increase. Failed expectations yield dissatisfaction and regret (and, I am tempted to say, nothing more, unless a relationship becomes characterized by these), but broken contracts have more serious consequences because of the behavioural reliance they create.

Curiously, this, and other rigorous boundary clarifications of psychological contract promises explained by Rousseau (1995) appears to have been overlooked even in her later publications, including the most recent ones (e.g., Tomprou et al., 2015). There are three plausible explanations for this contradiction in the literature. First, Rousseau's (1995) initial theorisation of the psychological contract was empirically unfit and thus neglected or revised. This possibility would be in accordance with Rousseau's (2001; 2011; Tomprou et al., 2015) later attempts to (re)theorise the psychological contract around cognition (or schema), but could barely justify the vast majority of the empirical research based on the promise-featured psychological contracts and has operationalised it accordingly, either by promise, obligation or expectation (i.e., they may all be promise-related beliefs; see Rousseau, 2011). From another methodological perspective, the predominant survey approach in researching the psychological contract is argued to be '*unlikely*' to accommodate the schema approach because schema is unique and difficult to assess (e.g., Sherman & Morley, 2015, p179; my emphasis). Another possibility may be that Rousseau's (1995) original theorisation stands to reason but has been difficult to operationalise by scholars. Since the suggested contractual promises are very rigorous, there would be many 'preconditions' to define them in order to appropriately capture the empirical phenomena, particularly so for the predominant survey approach. This explanation could go well with Conway and Briner's (2009) observation that the quantitative approaches seem to be due to 'practical, career and other reasons' (p108), but it would also likely put a vast number of scholars under the scrutiny of research competences, motivations or even ethics. A final possibility is that both approaches of theorising the psychological contract were justified and even

consonant with one another, meaning the psychological contract was centred on the notion of promise but also essentially reflected a cognitive structure of the mind. This explanation would be most plausible, given that both publications (i.e., Rousseau, 1995; 2001) have been popularly referenced in the existing literature. However, this possibility does not help resolve either predicament discussed above: as a promise-centred theory, its empirical research does not seem to sufficiently reflect the prerequisites of contractual promises; as a schema-based theory, neither does its empirical research seem to appropriately reflect the individual experiences or idiosyncratic perceptions. On this note, it is perhaps quite devastating for new researchers entering the field (such as myself) that there is a desperate lack of clarifications on these issues as to which of the above is or could be the case, what would need to be done to improve the theory, or guidance on how could empirical research contribute at a more fundamental/theoretical level instead of adding to, as I am tempted to say, the already chaotic empirical research (e.g., Conway & Briner, 2005). Notwithstanding more than a quarter century's empirical research since Rousseau (1989), there has yet to be *on-going* constructive (or destructive) arguments about the theory itself, except the earlier scholarly conversations on some of these issues which were quickly 'settled' (e.g., see Guest, 1998, Rousseau, 1998; Meckler, Drake & Levinson, 2003; Rousseau, 2003).

An immediate implication of the above discussion is an issue of the existing operationalisations of the psychological contract. While there has been an increasing awareness of adopting the right term to operationalise the psychological contract (e.g., Roehling, 2008; Rousseau, 2011), these discussions seem to have missed two critical

points. First, these discussions do not seem to reflect on the centrality of *contractual* promises or how the related issues could be addressed in the empirical studies. Second, the attention has been focused on what the psychological contract terms, i.e., obligation, promise and expectation, mean from the academic point of view, neglecting the fact that it is the participant's interpretations of these terms that really matters in the empirical research. Chapter 4 suggests that such negligence, e.g., on the participants' interpretations of obligations, is unadvisable and may have potentially profound impact on psychological contract research. This chapter extends the argument by pointing out that the word 'promise' has different lexical and theoretical meanings in English that have already been widely discussed by researchers (e.g., Rousseau, 1995; 2001; Bankins, 2010; 2014). Puzzlingly enough, despite the fact that scholars have yet to reach an agreement on a universal meaning of 'promise', the word has been used in the empirical studies as though the participants would somehow interpret it unambiguously, or their interpretations of the word would not matter. Theoretically, Rousseau (1995; 2001) adequately argues that the meanings of promises are consequential; empirically, the findings and discussions of this chapter support the argument. In fact, a considerable portion of the participants who believed their employers, for different reasons, were not reliable in holding up promises, felt so violated that they made comments as below with apparent annoyances during the interviews:

*Haven't I already told you about promises at work? You work and get paid
– that's all there is to it!*

Louis

There is no 'promise' whatsoever. It's just that...certainly the salary can't be delayed...Just this.

Rachel

No promises at work. It's just I work according to my pay. Go to work and go back home – watching the clock!

Victoria

Although these participants had different narratives about their employment experiences that may explain their similar perceptions, Bruce's account is indicative of the reasoning behind the perceived insignificance of employment promises of these participants:

*Promises and obligations are the same: useless. What of the 'obligation'?
What of the 'promise'? When you are really in need of the company's help,
everything changes.*

There can be two ways to interpret this data. These accounts may be interpreted as the dissolution of psychological contracts as suggested by Tomprou et al. (2015); or future intentions are less likely to be perceived as promises in the Chinese context for reasons discussed previously. While the preliminary findings of this chapter seem to support both views, neither has been currently reflected in the operationalising of the psychological contract, i.e., all participants had been assumed to not only have

functional psychological contracts but their interpretations of promises were conceptually equal and thus difference in interpretations was inconsequential. This is especially curious because the preliminary evidence seems to have already indicated that the native English workers may not interpret promises congruently with the academic assumptions (see Cassar & Briner, 2009). In a similar light, the findings of this chapter strongly suggest that the negligence on the theoretical or empirical meanings of promises is probably faulty and needs to be addressed in future research. The findings on the moral aspect of perceived promises and thus psychological contracts may be heuristic in this light.

5.4.3 Morality in Psychological Contracts

While Rousseau (1995) builds her argument for promises over expectations on the notion of 'behavioural losses' and thus the emotional reliance is argued to be less relevant (see Section 5.4.1), the findings of this chapter indicate that the significance of promises was more referred to by the participants from a moral perspective. As the above examples (Jay and Ken) suggest, both expectations and promises could result in behavioural reliance and thus possibly equal/similar behavioural losses (also see Roehling, 2008), but unmet promises are more likely to generate stronger negative affective outcomes (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Assuming unmet expectations and unmet promises resulted in equal behavioural losses, why would the participants feel more violated in the case of unmet promises? The findings of this chapter suggest an alternative explanation to the 'behavioural losses' approach, i.e., the inherent morality in keeping a promise, as in Raphael (1946, p124) that 'the obligations of carrying out a

promise ... are a part of justice’.

A particularly interesting point to mention here is Rousseau’s (2000a) assumption of American culture’s high tolerance of, for the lack of better phrase, promise-breaking. Although it is beyond the current scope to discuss in-depth, it helps to point out that there is no empirical evidence found insofar to support the assumption, partially because the existing research has rarely studied what kind of broken promises are considered contract breach (see later). The limited research evidence found by Briner and colleagues (Conway & Briner, 2002; Cassar & Briner, 2005; Cassar, Buttigieg & Briner, 2013; Cassar, Briner & Buttigieg, 2016) suggest that ‘the broken and exceeded promises...can range from the major...to what might be thought of as relatively trivial events (such as receiving another employee’s mail)’ (Conway & Briner, 2002; p295); it was consistently reported that the participants perceived contract breach when the promises were delayed and/or changed in magnitude or type/form, or when there was a perceived inequality and/or imbalance of exchange – by both qualitative (Cassar & Briner, 2005) and quantitative studies (Cassar, Buttigieg & Briner, 2013; Cassar, Briner & Buttigieg, 2016). These findings seem to suggest that the judgement of promise-keeping/breaking has less to do with the tolerance of uncertainty than the act of fulfilling a promise itself, which imply that the perceived significance of promise rather lies in the morality, or the taken-for-granted nature, of promise-keeping than the participants’ behavioural reliance of the perceived promises. Given that even the trivial broken promises had affective consequences of the employees, the moral aspect of promise and the emotional reliance of promise-keeping are arguably more meaningful

to underpin the promise-based contracts in the employment context. Nevertheless, while sometimes briefly mentioned (e.g., Rousseau, 1995), explicit explanations on the interconnections between justice and the psychological contract are rare to find. This is surprising because social exchange theories are first and foremost theories of justice, i.e., they essentially concern, study and argue about what is 'fair'. As Conway and Briner (2009) note, the idea of psychological contracts may be traced back to philosophy, 'although not ever cited ... directly' (p74). The philosophy referred to by Conway and Briner (2009) is Cabot's (1933) *The Meaning of Right and Wrong* – a book on morality.

The difficulty in incorporating morality into the psychological contract is arguably a heritage from the non-conclusion regarding 'promise' and 'contract' in the law literature (e.g., MacNeil, 1985). By restricting the psychological contract to a promissory nature, Rousseau (1989) implicitly legitimates the justice in keeping psychological contracts in a moral sense, for that the obligations to fulfil a promise should not require justice in terms of equality or equity (Raphael, 1946). However, Rousseau (1989), at the same time, gives the concept a contractual attribution which naturally involves an exchange relationship between two parties¹². As a result, some comparative justice is unavoidably required in order to determine if contracts are fair, i.e., exchange imbalance, or inequity (e.g., Cassar, Briner & Buttigieg, 2016). Despite seemingly contradictory, there is no logical reason to reject the assumption that breaching a promise-based contract involves both an imbalance and/or inequity in the exchange relationship and damage to morality or a fundamental principle of justice. Plausibly, the stronger emotional reactions may be

¹² Though there might be exceptions from a legal perspective (e.g., see Hutcheson, 1753).

due to a stronger combined feeling of injustice from both economic and moral perspectives when a promise-based contract is breached than when expectations are unmet. The recent research evidence supports these assumptions. Claiming to be the first authors examining the relationships between breach, justice and emotional well-beings, Cassar and Buttigieg (2015) conclude that:

Breach partially mediated the relationship between justice and well-being while justice levels did not differentiate this mediating effect except for interactional justice. Finally, the interaction between procedural and interactional justice failed to explain the mediating role of breach over and above their single contributions although interactional justice seemed to make a bigger impact (p217).

Therefore, moral justice in psychological contracts is potentially a helpful lens in understanding the psychological contract. Theoretically, unlike Gouldner (1960) and Blau (1964) who largely base their arguments on obligations stemmed from the feeling of indebtedness (see Greenberg, 1980) and intentions to keep ongoing exchange relationships, Rousseau (1989) bases her theory on the central notion of promise. While the ‘contract’ aspect of the theory has been well explained and argued, leading to the rigorous justifications of contractual promises, this emphasis is both challenging to justify (e.g., Guest, 1998) and operationalise (see above). The morality in promise-keeping, on the other hand, seems easier to explain and justify. From this vantage point, there is arguably no need to restrict psychological contracts to the

relied-on promises, for that although the consequences of unmet promises probably differ, there is likely to be an argument for the element of morality to fulfil a promise, regardless of its type. Accordingly, the empirical research should not need to rely on the notion of behavioural losses but instead embrace the notion of emotional reliance. This way, there is likely to be a theoretical and empirical niche for the psychological contract in a wide range of theories on justice and motivation; this niche, in turn, would rely on its upfront focus on the affective aspects of employment outcomes. Although this may likely attract criticism on its complicated theoretical underpinning, this indeed reflects both the nature of Rousseau's (1989) reconceptualisation of the psychological contact and, in a secondary sense, the results of its empirical research (especially the research based on 'promise').

Arguably, morality provides a unique vantage point for the psychological contract as it would be probably the first theory explicitly addressing the issue of both economic and moral exchanges in the employment relationship literature. From the empirical angle, operationalising the psychological contract on promises may be relatively easy to justify, while arguments about the issues of obligations, promises and expectations could potentially be avoided or reduced. Related to this, in attempting to assess the effects of different types of promise (Rousseau, 1995), the measures for empirical research could be relatively easy to adapt according to the purpose of the research. In regard to the (re)focus on affective outcomes, it is suggested that emotions may act as mediation/intermediary between breach and behaviours (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; see Priesemuth & Taylor, 2016), more likely to relate to psychological contracts

outcomes (Zhao et al., 2007) and essential in the reformation and/or dissolution of post-violation psychological contracts (Tomprou et al., 2015). From a cross-national perspective, the empirical research in different societies may be less restricted by the ‘bias on findings’ due to linguistic implications or the cultural influences, so long as such implications and cultures were understood and appropriately considered. However, whether ‘promise’ is the primary organising principle of psychological contracts in different societies (see Rousseau & Schalk, 2000) is a separate issue not to be included in this thesis.

The perceived morality in promise-keeping was probably also related to the perceived wider scope of less reliable promise-based employment exchanges by the participants. The basic and the wider employment exchanges underpinned by promises suggest that there are two different aspects of exchanges at work. While from the social exchange perspective these may be explained as economic and social exchanges (e.g., Blau, 1964), this explanation does not reject the idea that employment exchanges based on morality are also mostly above the basic contract. Accordingly, because the moral binding powers of promise-keeping were perceived to be uncertain, these wider employment exchanges were thought to be less dependable and easy to breach. As well, these findings also support the existing assumption that psychological contracts are over and above the basic employment contracts. From a more recent viewpoint, the morality in psychological contract is arguably in consonant with the notion of psychological contract dissolution (Tomprou et al., 2015), which is built on the issues of trust, emotion/coping and justice. All in all, further research should look into these directions

and investigate how morality may influence psychological contracts and their related outcomes. I will now summarise this chapter in the next section.

5.5 Conclusion and Contribution

The purpose of this chapter is to answer the research question: *How do Chinese workers interpret 'promise', especially in the employment context?* The findings suggest that promises were interpreted by the participants as voluntary agreements that engender some internal motivation for their delivery. The commitment toward promise-keeping was mostly thought to be taken for granted, although when probed, the participants suggested that the binding powers of promises were by and large from the moral perspective. Findings on promises in the Chinese employment context were indicative but suggested that promises were perceived to cover a wider scope of employment exchanges. However, due to the relatively weak binding powers of morality than legality, employment promises were perceived to be less dependable and more easily to break. The discussion section of this chapter suggests that these findings largely support Rousseau's (1995) notion of promise, assumptions about which are probably supported in the Chinese context. It highlights several issues in the existing operationalisations of the psychological contract and argues that the salient morality in promise-keeping has been largely neglected in the existing literature, especially at a theoretical level.

The findings and discussions of the chapter make three significant contributions to the literature. As the first empirical study to investigate the meanings of promises from the Chinese workers' perspective, the results of this chapter provide preliminary evidence

on the cultural/linguistic differences in meanings of promise across-societies, suggesting that such differences may have some important impact on the psychological contract, or at least people's interpretations of it. Related to this, it highlights the risky negligence in the existing empirical research on the academically defined boundary of contractual promises and the unadvisable assumption on how the participants may interpret the meaning of promises in the empirical studies. In fact, even this assumption has been so implicit that no explicit clarifications of what the promises are assumed to mean to the participants were found in the empirical studies. This contribution is rather disturbing because by implication it seems to challenge the majority, if not all, of the existing operationalisations of the psychological contract, at least for the quantitative approaches. A potential way to make sense of the existing literature has been tendered by the final contribution which emphasises the morality in psychological contracts and thus opens a window for a potentially fruitful direction for the theoretical development of the psychological contract. The next chapter focuses on the participants' interpretations of the final notion studied in this research: the other party of the employment relationship.

Chapter 6 ‘The Other Party’ in Chinese Employment

This chapter discusses data regarding interpretations and perceptions of ‘the other party’ of the employment relationship (‘the other party’ hereafter) by the Chinese workers. The initial data analysis adopted a relatively straightforward approach because there were clearly emerging themes under which the participants’ interpretations could be put into (i.e., ‘company’, ‘boss’, ‘client’, etc.). Later more in-depth analyses of the text and literature led to some important reflections on the complexity of the exchange and power relationships at work (Section 6.3; see Chapter 7), including the recognition that understanding the diversified employment arrangements of participants (Section 6.3.1), and the related contextual dynamics, were necessary in understanding their perceptions and employment experiences. Essentially, this chapter provides a backdrop for understanding the perceptions of employment relationships in China. From this perspective, this chapter paves its way to the next chapter that focuses on the perceived implicit employment terms in China. As well, different perceptions of the other party may imply different parties of psychological contracts, which in turn have both theoretical and empirical implications (Section 6.4; also see Chapter 2). I begin with the data relating to interpreting the other party as the employing organisations.

6.1 The Other Party as the Employing Organisation

When asked ‘Who or what would you say is the other party of your employment relationship?’, the participants frequently mentioned their employing organisations directly. Terms commonly used include ‘company’, ‘unit’ (see Chapter 1), and names or

partial names of the employing organisation (these names will be replaced by 'AAA' in this thesis). In addition, a few participants used the term 'employer', 'the employing party' or 'enterprise'. When asked to elaborate, the participants commonly showed some difficulties in providing articulated accounts (see later). In general, the data suggest that the participants thought the employing organisations were somewhat abstract to explain, though usually related it to some concrete and/or abstract sub-concepts, such as office buildings, people, profits, production, brand name, salary, etc.. Overall, the data analysis is inclined to suggest that 'company' was by and large perceived as a comprehensive and collective/holistic entity. For example:

I think the employer is like an enterprise. It refers not only to one person...but must also include bosses, employees and subordinates; as well as the operation and products. All these need to be combined and thus form a...unity.

Caroline

Company is just a collectivity, ...including its working environment, working venue, personnel, management...and its regulations and procedures.

Brian

Interpreting from the perspective of the word 'company' (his own English word), ...put it bluntly, it is just the legal representative of the organisation...It's associated with things like shareholding, business

operation, teams, middle management, bonuses, ... work division, bosses and buildings.

William

I'd like to say 'company' Company is a place to produce profits and where people work.... It is abstract...and comprehensive, including personnel, all kinds of resources and service.

Ethan

The participants often found it hard to explain with details, especially for those less educated:

Researcher: Who or what would you say is the other party of your employment relationship?

Toni: The unit.

Researcher: How would you understand 'the unit'? What would you think of when thinking about 'the unit'?

Toni: Nothing

Researcher: Which words would you associate to 'the unit'?

Toni: Salary

Researcher: Nothing else?

Toni: Nothing else.

Researcher: ...would you think of things like regulations or colleagues?

Toni: Never thought of that.

Researcher: So, 'the unit' is just paying the salary?

Toni: Yes. Correct. So long as I work, it pays me salary.

As indicated in the above, it was not uncommon that the participants found it difficult to give articulated elaborations of the other party and seemed to have simplistic ideas about the concept – usually including the most basic employment exchanges such as job duties and salaries – even including some of the highly educated. For example:

Researcher: Who or what would you say is the other party of your employment relationship?

Hannah: The company.

Researcher: How would you understand about this 'company'?

Hannah: ...just the bank... 【i.e., her employer】

Researcher: Which words would you associate to 'company'?

Hannah: First reaction: deposit! 【Laughter】

Researcher: Anything else?

Hannah: It seems like I can't think about much. I think if working in a bank, the first word coming to mind is deposit...I just really can't think of anything else.

On the other hand, the employing organisations were also thought as a somewhat symbolic or spiritual entity. These interpretations usually involved some kind of

purposes/reputations of, or feelings toward, the company. For example, when answering the question ‘What or who would you say is the other party of your employment relationship’, Raymond, a law enforcement member, seemed to relate the other party to a kind of reputation:

You mean who employed me?...It is AAA... just the unit...It has the good name out there. You know Fushun this place sometimes can be quite judgemental...: either you earn a lot of money or the unit has a good reputation...It's basically just what it is: AAA sounds cool if you talk to people about it – though you earn little.

Similarly, Sara thought the employing organisation has some leading roles and moral responsibilities toward the employees:

I think the company is more like an organisation...in which I perform the work...This organisation, it's like, leads all of us...to a better life – that kind of feeling.

Because Sara was the first participant of this research and did not mention the word ‘employer’ – a commonly used English term in the literature, she was also asked whether there was a perceived difference between ‘employer’ (‘雇主’) and ‘company’ (‘公司’). The purpose of asking was largely for a precaution to remove potential linguistic complications, since inappropriately framed questions might result in

uncertain data validity or reliability. Sara said:

I think 'employer' is more to some management,....a tangible person of some sort, e.g., the general manager or some kind of manager/administrator.

Due to the potential of some interpretive differences between the concerned terms, the interviews throughout the fieldwork were carefully managed to avoid complications over the issue: the researcher had always stayed consistent with the participant in using their own preferred terms and only explored some potential perceived differences at the end of the related discussions (see Section 6.4). A last note of this section is a noticed tendency in relating the employing organisation to some organisational agents when elaborating the concept, whereby the latter was commonly perceived to be more important than the former at workplace. These data were difficult to code as they seemed to possibly fall under both/either themes of 'employing organisations' and/or 'organisational agents'. After several revisions, the concerned participant accounts were mostly coded under Section 6.3, as they were judged to actually reflect the complexity of relationships at work, at least in the Chinese context. Nevertheless, it is important to clarify that the coding of such data could be more subjective, ambiguous or arbitrary. In order to give the reader some idea, I provide an example below that was judged to potentially fit better under the present theme (highlights are Aaron's own English words):

Erm...I think who signed the contract with me, who has the labour relationship with me – so, it is this company....Company is a kind of institution, then you had an agreement with someone in it to do some kind of work....HR was in charge of discussing your salary, and your boss discussed...your work....And then your team leader talked to you about more detailed duties...so on your job performance, it is probably the team leader who actually matters...

Aaron's account offers insights to understand why a substantial portion of the participants directly referred to the other party as the organisational representatives. The findings on these data are presented next.

6.2 The Other Party as Organisational Agents

As Aaron (see the above section) explained, regarding the direct superior as the other party was probably due to the immediacy of authority concerning work. Not surprisingly, the data analysis shows a tendency to relate to the most immediate authority in light of the other party. For example:

Researcher: Let's say you are one party of the employment relationship, who or what would you think is the other party?

Yoyo: If talking about my present job, the other party is related to the hospital; it must be the Dean of Medicine who employed me.

Researcher: Meaning that you think some person has an employment relationship with you?

Yoyo: Anyhow, I think if talking about work, it is all about the Head of Department.... Because the Dean of Medicine is too far away that can't see how we work. So primarily it is still about the Head of Department.

The data analysis shows that the participants' reasoning to focus on the immediate management seems to be that the higher management was perceived to be too remote to decide/monitor the actual work, and thus less likely to have direct influences over the daily work life of the participants. Understandably, this also implies that the immediate authorities might have some influences over the evaluations of work performance and thus potentially also the levels of salary. According to Alice:

In my employment relationship, I think...who gives me money who is the 'god'! 【laughter】 ...Can't talk about the biggest head of the company – I have never seen her/him. Let's put it as the head of our centre....It's not like s/he directly leads us, but we – you know like supervisors – got to work according to her/his wills.

A possible influence of the perception of the other party suggested by the data analysis is the size of the company. For smaller businesses, *'the company belongs to the boss...so I think it is just the boss, or whoever...pays you'* (Ellison). As well, *'perhaps*

when the company is small, its company culture is just the culture of the boss, depending on her/his characteristics....But in big companies, the 'bosses' change" (Elena). Similarly, Rebecca thought her employment relationship was with her *'boss, i.e.,...leader...that decides the pay'*. Although this line of reasoning seems logical, the participants' perceptions differed and the data could not suggest what size of the company would be small enough to have an influence on the participants' perceptions. In addition, there seemed to be a slight tendency in regarding the private company as *'small'*, regardless of its size.

Returning to what has been discussed previously, the level of immediacy was revealed more consistently by the participants when answering the question of who is the other party of their employment relationship. For example:

It's certainly the boss....Because it's like every enterprise has many levels of management...We can't see the big heads... – we work here and simply listen to the boss here.

Bruce

*It's just the relationship with the boss that exists – what else could it be?....
If you work at a small place...the boss is the company, the company is the boss.... Talking about big companies,...you can't even see who's the big head at all, though there are many layers in the concept of a company. You only see the lowest level....the rest is irrelevant to us.*

As explained in the previous section, sometimes even when the participants acknowledged that the company represented the other party, they actually viewed their immediate superiors as more powerful and relevant to their work. This trend was observed even by the participants working at big corporations. For example, Jeremy was a supervisor working at a MNC in Xiamen; he thought:

The company and I signify this kind of employment relationship. But I am not at the headquarters of the company. I am outside doing other projects. The kind of things regarding my work...is all represented through my boss, i.e., the line manager....I have no concept of the company. I just refer to my boss.

It was not surprising that some Chinese workers emphasised the relationship with the boss, but it was rather unexpected that the participants did so across a range of industries, levels of educations, organisational positions and types of contracts. Out of precaution, efforts were made to ensure that the participants understood the question correctly and clarifications were sought when possible misunderstandings / misinterpretations by either side might occur. The below example may be particularly illuminating for comprehending the participants' rationale to perceive the powerful authority at work as the other party:

- Researcher:* So, you think your relationship is not with the unit but just with the leader?
- Wilson:* The leader is who I deal with!....We are in a bureau, so it's just the Head of Bureau....
- Researcher:* In your understanding, do you think the Head could represent the whole unit?
- Wilson:* What of the departments or bureaus? At least he represents your department – he is the 'god'!
- Researcher:* So, it is not a relationship with the department, but just with the Head?
- Wilson:* That is already the relationship with the department: isn't it that the Head who decides this department? The reimbursement kind of thing – all relies on his signature!....You may survive offending the Deputy Head, but not the Head – that's the only existing relationship, because only the Head's signature works...

While Wilson elucidated quite well his rationale of regarding the powerful party at work as the other party, it is reminded that Wilson was a socialist worker (see Section 6.3.1 for clarifications of workers). This may be relevant because, as I will soon show, a few socialist workers refused to call their relationship with the employing organisation, or rather, the government, as 'employment relationship'. There could be an influence from the nature of Wilson's employment on his perception or interpretation of the question,

although the data analysis seems quite convincing that the immediacy of authority would probably be more significant. In general, the data indicate that on the issue of the other party, the Chinese employment context may be more complicated than assumed in the empirical research. The next section presents findings on the revealed complexity of the Chinese employment relationships.

6.3 The Complexity of Relationships at Work

As discussed in the Introduction chapter, a prominent feature of the Chinese employment context is its dual employment system, i.e., the co-existence of socialist and capitalist workers. The influence of this feature was particularly revealed by some workers involved in employment with strong socialist influences, although it must be stressed that the sample of socialist workers included in this study (see Chapter 3) may be neither representative nor sufficient to assert conclusion. However, the inclusion of these special employment relationships, together with the data gathered from their co-workers on different work arrangements, proved to be very heuristic and insightful. For example:

Researcher: Who or what do you think that has this employment relationship with you?

Jack: The employer.

Researcher: Based on your current job, what's your concept of 'employer'?

Jack: For this job, the employer is just the country.

Researcher: ...so it is not like someone or some organisation, but just a very general concept?

Jack: From the perspective of my current job, I am just working for the country, it's nothing like for someone or whatever....What I am doing now is the city management, mainly about the environment; if I make the environment better, wouldn't it be a contribution to the country?...

Working in law enforcement on a government contract, Jack had an unusual employment relationship called the 'voluntary position'. In simplistic terms, these positions are basically created by a certain government bureau – or the Employment Bureau according to the participants – that contracts workers to be assigned to other government bodies. For the purpose of this chapter, these workers may be understood as formal contract workers doing voluntary work, and thus with minimum levels of pay, for the Chinese government; or in Andrew's words '*the government's temporary worker*' but '*very stable*'. According to Jack, he was '*just a contract worker*', but "*there's no such thing like 'firing' you*". Apparently, there was a taken-for-granted belief on the infinite employment term or job security regarding the 'voluntary position', as Linda put it:

The other part is just...the local government....It feels different from where I worked before: one is collective, the other is private. It probably won't happen here like, for example, if I offended my leader, then he'd tell me

'Leave. You are fired'. But if you work for a private boss, you could be fired for no reason.

Arguably relating to the taken-for-granted job security, there was an unexpected observation that some of the participants thought there was no 'employment relationship': for example, Bell thought *'it is a responsibility relationship'*. Since this lack of the concept of employment relationship seemed rather unexpected, repetitions or paraphrased questions were used to make sure there had been no miscommunication:

Researcher: So, how would you describe your work relationship? Would you call it 'employment relationship'? Or, perhaps, 'labour or work relationship'?

Susan: I don't think so....I don't think it is 'employment relationship'. It is just a very normal job, a working environment.

Researcher: Then, in this 'working environment', would you feel like you have some kind of work or labour relationship?

Susan: I am not sure....I can't think of a word to describe it....

Similarly, Robert thought *'to me it is just a job'* and explained that *"usually talking about the 'unit' people think about enterprises, etc., but our work just isn't like that"*. In contrast, a formal socialist worker seemed to know exactly what kind of employment she had:

Researcher: In your employment relationship – oh right, what kind of relationship would you call it at work?

Penelope: 【Laughter】 Our interview is not representative for your research, because the kind of relationship we have is basically that once you got in, you will be here for life so long as you do not make ‘catastrophic’ mistakes.

Researcher: So, you wouldn’t call it ‘employment relationship’?

Penelope: I personally think you can’t even call it ‘labour relationship’. Because after I have got into the system, my leader and the personnel department – if I haven’t done anything disastrous – have no right to end this relationship with me.

Researcher: What relationship is that, then?

Penelope: This relationship is what’s called the ‘Iron Rice Bowl’ relationship. 【Laughter】 But this ‘Iron Rice Bowl’ relationship can be just explained as the country pays me to serve the people.

Penelope was a supervisory grade civil servant. Her understandings and accounts of the socialist employment appeared consistent with the literature, and she was quite precise in pointing out that her ‘Iron Rice Bowl’ was different from that of state-owned enterprises: her job was to serve the people but not for any usual business/enterprise purposes. This perception seemed highly influential in Penelope’s understandings of her employment obligations and promises, in that she spent half of the interview talking

about her passions in serving the 'people'. Due to the guaranteed life-long employment and other salient employment features, such as 'no contract' but '*probably a job description...though I haven't seen it*', '*the salary is rigid*' and '*there's nothing like human resource management or...advanced incentive system*', the dynamics of Penelope's 'Iron Rice Bowl' employment appeared different from all the other participants, more so from the western context. While it is beyond the current scope to further discuss these issues, a helpful reminder might be that the promotion system is rigid in the socialist employment and salary scales are fixed/decided at central levels (see Chapter 1).

Another interesting group of participants that had a complex employment relationship was the agency workers. Most of these workers showed an awareness of dual employment relationships at work. When probed for clarifications, there were perceived to be a contract relationship with the labour agency and a direct work relationship with the client company where the participants worked. For example (AAA signifies the labour agency; BBB signifies the client company):

Erm...let's put it like this. The relationship with BBB is work relationship, but my employment contract is with AAA...that is more like the employer. My service client is BBB, it is more like the company.

Aaron

The employment relationship should be with the labour agency....The work

relationship is definitely with the company.

Eric

While there seemed to be a slight tendency to refer to 'company' as the company where the participants performed daily work duties, a few participants also referred to the employing agency as 'company':

My employment relationship is at Beijing;...work relationship is at Xiamen... My employment relationship...belongs to our company (i.e., in Beijing). But the company only communicates with my client's manager...It means the company and I only have an employment relationship, but all my career planning and management are related to my client's manager.

Jeremy

This awareness of the dual relationship at work was also evident in socialist work settings, typically the 'voluntary position' workers who signed contracts with the employing bureau to work at other government bodies where they were assigned to:

Our labour relationship...is with the Employment Bureau, but work relationship should be here at the local government.

Sabrina

Although some of the participants '*may not have the clear concepts about*' the dual

work relationship, when probed, all the agency workers appeared to at least understand which side *'gives money'* and which side *'assigns work'* (Anna).

During in-depth discussions, the other party was also perceived to be 'self' or 'client', although mostly by implications. For example:

...Essentially, it is actually just with myself...I spent my own time to do something and then in exchange get back some money – is it not I am exchanging with myself?

Ellison

At a deeper level, it can be said to be the clients....The clients are the boss, I am their employee....Clients come to do business with the bank...making contributions to our profit, only that the bank has money to pay us. It depends on how you interpret it...

Ken

The data analysis shows that not uncommonly, the participants perceived multiple relationships at work, especially with the company, the management and the client; to a lesser extent, the colleagues. For example, Kevin said his *'employment relationship...is with the enterprise'* but believed that *'the other party of my current work relationship is the client'*. James said: *'The other party? The client! There is also a contract relationship with the company'*; he further explained that *'it must be the subsidiary*

company that employs you; it can't be the headquarters....So if you follow that logic, it comes down to just the relationship between you and your leader'. Interestingly, a couple of participants also used the family metaphor to describe the relationships at work, including 'children', 'father', 'grandfather', 'great grandfather', etc. (Monica). According to Ian:

Erm...how to say...Sometimes I'd rather understand it as some simple work relationship with the boss, although...I can't help it but to take myself as a little brother in relationships with big brothers, big sisters, uncles and aunties....I'd prefer to imagine it as a big family...

The data analysis suggests that the relationships at work were more complex than suggested by the psychological contract literature in the Chinese employment context. During the in-depth analysis of the data, the significance of employment arrangements and contexts started to emerge and increase. When the vastly diversified employment arrangements included in this study even struck me as a surprise, a decision needed to be made on whether this issue should be included and discussed separately. On one hand, the information collected from the participants and informants was difficult to verify, given that there was very limited official documentation or resources found to completely confirm or disconfirm their accounts. On the other hand, the lack of materials in this light signalled a desperate need for the related knowledge, especially for readers who may not be familiar with the Chinese employment context. On balance, the judgement was to present the related information for three reasons. First, although

no literature was found to fully support the participants' accounts on their employment arrangements, there was an internal consistency among their accounts. Related to this, the participants accounts were in line with the related laws in China and would support the most recent literature on Chinese employment relations (see Section 6.5). Finally, such contextual knowledge may be particularly helpful for the reader to understand some participants' accounts, especially in this and the next chapter. The diversity of employment contexts included in this study is explained next.

6.3.1 Diversity of Employment Arrangements

For the unique feature of the Chinese employment relationships and the benefit of western readers, this subsection primarily targets the socialist employment arrangements included in the study. The subsection below is summarised from the main interviews, supplemented by some additional informant interviews with workers in varied work contexts. Due to a lack of open access to the official documents, the findings included in this subsection are intended to be indicative.

The term 'socialist employment' is an over-simplification of the vastly diversified employment arrangements involving socialist elements included in this study. It ranged from the 'Iron Rice Bowl' without a contract, to a contract system almost identical to the capitalist employment but with strong socialist interventions on employment terms. It is hard to clarify or understand all the socialist employment arrangements in between of these two extremes, even for the participants/informants concerned; despite the fact that the diversity seemed to differ from both legal and financial perspectives.

Nevertheless, all the concerned operations are heavily involved or intervened with by the governments; in turn, the governments usually have measures to guarantee their operations and thus have according mechanisms for their recruitment and/or promotion. Such mechanisms are usually referred to by the ordinary Chinese as the ‘quota’ (‘编制’), referring to an employment system of centrally planned and managed labour force. An example of how such ‘quota’ system works was provided by Wilson:

For example, say the quota is 100 workers for my bureau – the central government only allocates funds for 100 heads at, say, 10,000 Yuan per head per year. Now the bureau wants to have an additional local quota of 20 people, but the central government still pays for the 100 heads – so where would the 20 additional people get the money? Maybe the 120 workers would share the centrally allocated fund for the 100 quota...or depending on the local tax income the local government might provide some support.

Those workers with ‘quota’ status are commonly referred to as ‘in-system’ (‘体制内’) or ‘with-quota’ (‘有编制’) in China. Regardless of where they worked, they would be entitled for the centrally regulated employment benefits, mostly according to their rankings in the ‘quota’ system. Depending on the sources of finance, the levels of salary and/or bonuses/commissions varied among these workers. Within the ‘quota’ system, a worker might or might not have a contract; when a contract was applicable, it might be signed with the government (e.g., bureaus) or the ‘company’ (e.g., national banks). For

example, Penelope worked at a local government; she had nationally standardised income and employment benefits according to her ranking in her 'quota' system¹³. Wilson worked at a local bureau; his employment benefits were 'with reference' to the civil servants but income was more locally standardised according to the local government and the bureau. Louis' employment had a transition as his employer became a sole state-owned public company from a government bureau shortly before the fieldwork; his employment benefits were similar to Wilson's but income included the basic/standardised portion and some performance-based extra income. Yoyo worked at a government hospital and her employment terms were according to her ranking in her 'quota' system but more directly determined by the local Bureau of Personnel. Lisa had a permanent contract with a state-owned public company and her employment terms were according to the terms specified in the contract; these employment terms, in turn, were heavily influenced by her ranking in her 'quota' system.

In any type of the organisation/institution discussed above, there were co-workers who were employed 'out-system', i.e., on capitalist contracts. For those 'out-system' workers working in the socialist working environment, a contract might be signed with the government, the 'company', a labour agency, or no contract at all; these contracts might or might not be of an infinite term. For example, Sally had an 8-year-fixed contract with a state-owned public company; Jack had a contract with a local government of an

¹³ Note that civil servants are recruited at different levels in China, i.e., national civil servants (e.g., Penelope) and local civil servants (no participant in this study appeared to belong to this category). These two groups of civil servants have different employment terms and are regulated at different levels of governments, while the latter refers to yet different levels/groups/types of civil servants.

undefined employment period; Hannah had an agency contract to work at a state-held public company; and, Paul worked as an informal worker at a government school. The employment terms of these ‘out-system’ socialist workers may differ or have been standardised to varying degrees, depending on the signing party of the contract. In the above examples, Sally and Jack had stable and standardised employment benefits, but Jack had a fixed salary while Sally’s income partially depended on her job performance. Hannah had minimum employment benefits that were in accordance with her employing agency and her salary was jointly determined by her client and the agency. Paul had a fixed salary and occasional bonuses but little employment benefit. Not surprisingly, the ‘in-system’ workers had better employment terms than the ‘out-system’ socialist co-workers; the directly hired ‘out-system’ workers better than their agency co-workers; the latter is still better than their informal co-workers. Due to the complex socialist employment arrangements, sometimes the employment terms between ‘in-system’ co-workers could be very different as well:

The differences between ‘quanmin’ and ‘jiti’ workers 【see later】 are huge....For example, in the petroleum sector, the ‘quanmin’ workers may not need to do any work but still get more; the ‘jiti’ workers need to do everything yet still get less. The simplest example is here at the Bureau,...‘quanmin’ workers get higher salaries but the ‘jiti’ workers are treated like the adopted kids – you do more work but earn less.

Wilson (in-system)

Wilson explained that ‘quanmin’ and ‘jiti’ workers are two different types of workers that were both ‘*in the system*’, but ‘*nobody knows why*’ that the employment treatments were so different. Therefore, the complexity involved in the socialist employment system seems not only due to the variety of possible arrangements, but also the internal dynamics between different groups of workers.

So far, the diversity of the employment arrangements without, or with little, socialist elements have not been discussed (i.e., those comparable to the western literature; e.g., Kalleberg, 2000), nor the informal workers who had no legal contracts working in the private sectors. In short, the employment arrangements of the sample were hugely differentiated. For example, Ian was a permanent worker at a foreign-owned company; Jeremy was an agency worker at a MNC; Elena worked as a part-time salesperson at a SME; Keven had a fixed-term contract with a local wholesaler; Rachel had some flexible work (i.e., similar to the zero hour contract) at a joint venture; Eric worked through an agency at a state-owned company but had no contract with any party; and, Adam was an in-system worker at a state-owned public company (i.e., a contract was not applicable), but had a permanent contract with one of its subsidiary state-owned enterprises and an informal contract with a private travel agency (i.e., off-the-book incomes). I will discuss the related issues in the next section.

6.4 Discussion and Implication

Though complex, the findings of this chapter are to an extent consistent with the literature. To begin with, the findings provide support for the hypothesis that agency

workers may simultaneously perceive multiple agencies in their employment relationships (Parks, Kidder & Gallagher, 1998). Despite that the multi-agency issue has been relatively less researched in the literature, this may be potentially fruitful in the Chinese context. Considering that there were more than 75 million agency workers in the Chinese industry and service sectors alone (Wong, 2009), this type of employment arrangement occupies an important place in the Chinese employment and has been accordingly studied by the indigenous psychological contract scholars (for a meta-analysis, see Bi & Yan, 2007). Related to this, the complex Chinese employment context has been largely neglected in the research. Although differences in terms of employment experiences and psychological contracts between standard and nonstandard workers (e.g., Kalleberg, 2000) are relatively well acknowledged (e.g., Cuyper et al., 2008; Guest, Isaksson & De Witte, 2010; Ashford, George & Blatt, 2007), these have not been reflected in the studies in the Chinese context. This negligence is particularly unwise for at least three reasons. First, the fixed-term contract is legally categorised as a primary source of, at least the capitalist, employment in China. From this perspective, there is arguably a significant ambiguity in the Chinese context to categorise workers according to the western standard (see Cuyper et al., 2008). This is likely to impact on at least two strands of research in the Chinese context, i.e., employment relations (e.g., see Shore et al. 2004) and nonstandard employment arrangements (e.g., see Ashford, George & Blatt, 2007); including the psychological contract (e.g., Guest, Isaksson & De Witte, 2010). Related to this, the most recent literature seems to begin paying more attention to the employment diversity in China, as Friedman and Kuruville (2015) argue that:

China is taking an experimental and decentralized approach to the development of new labor relations frameworks....Firms and local governments have been given a degree of space to experiment with different arrangements....The consequence has been an increasingly differentiated labor relations landscape, with significant variation by region and sector (p181).

Perhaps more importantly, the existing management literature seems to have overlooked the unique feature of the dual employment system in China, resulting in, not the least, a preclusion of some socialist workers in the Chinese context. Although the socialist employment arrangements were traditionally argued to be less relevant to, for example, the psychological contract (e.g., Rousseau & Schalk, 2000), the findings of this chapter suggest that such arguments may require further investigations (see later). Correspondingly, the diversity and complexity of the employment context in China has crucial implications for the management scholars, including the categorisations of the ‘standard’ and ‘nonstandard’ employment in China, as well as the implicit employment inequality between workers due to the nature of their employment arrangements. While I have explained these in more detail elsewhere¹⁴, it is worth noting that it would be at best speculative to continue the studies regarding employment relations, or the related theories based in the west, with the unexamined existing assumptions of the Chinese employment context. The findings of this chapter indicate an urgent need of future

¹⁴ See Ma, G.X. (2015). Who are Chinese ‘Atypical’ Workers?: ‘Unequal Pay for Equal Work’ in China. Presented at Comparative Employment and Industrial Relations Conference: Quo Vadis Labor? Work and Challenges in the Global Economy. University of Manchester, June 19, 2015.

research in this light. From another perspective, although the Chinese dual employment system and diversified employment context may be challenging to study employment relations at a higher level¹⁵, some segments of the Chinese employment, or its dynamics, may provide ideal samples to study micro management issues and organisational behaviours. The findings of this chapter suggest that the Chinese employment context is unfamiliar, interesting and significant. Not only would it be unadvisable to neglect its contextual complexities in the management research in China, but also its employment context may open up windows for some new and interesting research directions (see Chapter 7). From another perspective, an interesting question to ask would be that if the Chinese employment context is argued to be so distinct and different from the west, how would the mainstream theories and research – mostly conceived and tested in the west – really inform our world knowledge, or what would be the justification for favouring them compared with some indigenous concepts, such as *guanxi* (e.g., Chen & Chen, 2004), paternalistic leadership (e.g., Farh & Cheng, 2000) and harmony (e.g., Lun, 2012)?

Following on from this, the dual employment structure in the Chinese context is crucial in studying psychological contracts in China, since the perceived bargaining power of employees is principally influenced by the formal employment structures in a given society (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). Without appropriate knowledge on the relative power differences, and thus the perceived bargaining powers, between the parties at

¹⁵ An important factor to consider in this light is the issue on the highly flexible and complex union-related practices in China. This issue was not revealed in the findings; interested readers may be referred to Liu (2010) for some heuristics.

work, it would be very challenging to infer the Chinese workers' willingness to engage in information sharing and/or negotiations (see Rousseau, 2001a), never mind the mutuality of psychological contracts in the Chinese context (see Rousseau, 2001; Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). A particular issue in this light is the zone of negotiability and the role of the state. Rousseau and Schalk (2000) might not intend to include socialist employment when they write that 'in societies with strong state influence or central agreements, the focus of negotiation and flexibility shifts to what is possible within the rules or how those rules can be bent' (p289). Nevertheless, their assumption might be misguided or outdated that to 'refer to psychological contracts in China as the "iron rice bowl" is more metaphoric...because these agreements are not voluntarily entered into' (p5). The data collected from the socialist workers in this study indicates that while these workers might not be necessarily satisfied with their employment experiences, they probably had entered the employment quite willingly:

You should have known that the salary won't be good even before you decide to take the entry exam.

Penelope

The fact that there are examination systems to recruit socialist workers implies that – for the present purpose let us call it – the 'New Iron Rice Bowl' is not only voluntary, but even competitive. It may appear attractive to the Chinese workers probably due to the guaranteed employment security and some favourable socialist employment benefits. The voluntary but centrally determined socialist and/or related employment

arrangements (e.g., ‘voluntary positions’) in the present era of China may be an ideal sample to test Rousseau and Schalk’s (2000) idea that ‘the presence of preset guarantees provides a context for interpreting the employment relationship’s more idiosyncratic terms’ (p289). The findings of this chapter seem to partially support their assumption. For example, among the socialist workers interviewed, Louis and Yoyo thought they had employment relationships with their leaders while Penelope perceived she had no employment relationship and thus it was hard to define who the other party was, possibly the *‘people’*, the *‘country’*, her *‘self’* and/or the *‘leader’* depending on context. Among the interviewed ‘voluntary position’ workers, for example, Jack thought the other party was the country; Sabrina thought it was the bureau that issued the contract, but her colleague, Bell, thought it was the local government. While these may provide evidence that the perception of who is on the other side of the negotiation may be highly subjective (Rousseau, 2011), the diversified perceptions among the participants whose employment terms were all under heavy state influence might warrant some caution regarding the assumed role of government in the psychological contracts in China (see Rousseau & Schalk, 2000).

In addition, the findings seem to be highly in line with the literature in suggesting the important role of supervisors on psychological contracts (see Hornung, Rousseau & Glaser, 2009). Because immediate supervisors were commonly regarded as having primary importance by the participants, the findings of this chapter appear to support Hui, Lee and Rousseau’s (2004) adaptation to use ‘supervisor’ as the other party in the measure. The findings suggest that the perceived importance of the immediate superior

is likely to be the immediacy of monitoring and authority, which was in turn interpreted by the participants as more immediate organisational powers over their work life, e.g., on assignment of duties, appraisal of performance and/or salary. This implies that the assumed social exchanges between workers and supervisors might also be based on a dependence of power, which seems to be well recognised in the psychological contract literature (e.g., see Rousseau, 2001; 2011) and discussed in Blau's (1964a) social exchange theory. Nevertheless, our existing knowledge is still limited on power relations at work and psychological contracts (see Rousseau, 2011), mostly relating to the bargaining powers or the zone of negotiability (Rousseau, 1995; Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). These issues regarding leader and power will be further revealed, elaborated and discussed in Chapter 7.

Another possibly interesting issue is that, as indicated in Section 6.1, the word 'employer' ('guzhu') in Chinese has a strong connotation toward 'people'. Although this issue is out of the present scope, it is worthy of a note because 'employer' seems to have been used in the research in China (e.g., Chen, Tsui & Zhong, 2008; Lee et al., 2011; Gardner et al., 2014). When asked to interpret 'employer', almost all the participants confirmed the connotation. The most interesting examples involved interpretations in both Chinese and English. According to Collin (highlights are his English words):

When I say 'guzhu', I mean that it has a humanised attribution.... I feel like, in concept, 'guzhu' is just a person.... I am now thinking in Chinese, but if

you use English, i.e., 'employer', then it is correct that it signifies a 'company'.

In the same light, Brian initially answered the question in English terms and still had similar interpretations (highlights are his English words):

Brian: Erm...Personally, I think I am the 'employee', so the company is the 'employer'....

Researcher: ...Do you think 'guzhu' and 'company' are same concepts?

Brian: Not the same.

Researcher: Any difference?

Brian: Em, 'guzhu' means it is prone to some personal influences, whereas things are mostly carried out according to regulations in a company.

Although the related data seem very convincing and conclusive in regard to the above issue, it would be hard to determine its implications for the concerned psychological contract studies in China. This is because the available materials do not seem to explicitly suggest how the questionnaires were phrased, or how 'employer' was translated into Chinese. Nevertheless, it may be a sensible advice to avoid using the word 'guzhu' (i.e., 'employer' in the Chinese language) in future research in China, or at least have an adequate awareness of its likely connotation. A final note is on the term 'organisation' that has also been used in the studies in China (Si, Wei & Li, 2008; Bao,

et al., 2011). Because this term was not explored, no inference can be made regarding the potential implications, if any. Since no participant referred to 'zuzhi' (i.e., 'organisation' in Chinese) as the other party when interviewed, it might not be a preferred term to be used in the research in China. However, because both studies (see above) were conducted by native Chinese scholars and 'zuzhi' in Chinese seems to be a rather inclusive term, possibly comprising 'company', 'enterprise' and 'unit', this issue could potentially be worthy of some future discussions for matters of operationalising the psychological contract in China.

In summary, the findings of this chapter suggest that it would be extremely challenging to understand psychological contracts in the Chinese context without the appropriate reflection on the dynamics of the dual employment system. A seminal example in this light is the first empirical study in mainland China, wherein the scholars did not seem to discuss the implications of their samples recruited from a single state-owned enterprise (Hui, Lee & Rousseau, 2004). The lack of contextual consideration/comprehension of their samples seems to have led to the unelaborated dropping of questionnaire items in their analyses. To demonstrate, the participants' beliefs regarding the dropped items such as 'It can terminate my employment any time', 'Secure employment' and 'Stable wages over time' were probably already pre-determined by their participants' employment arrangements. The research in China, being quantitative in nature, appears to cascade onward through time by basing their studies on Hui, Lee and Rousseau's (2004) results or even their adapted measures (e.g., Shih and Chen, 2011), resulting in an complete ignorance of the complexity of the dual employment system in the Chinese

context. The findings of this chapter suggest that this complexity deserves more discussions. At the very least, future research should pay more attention to the issue of the perceived other party by the participants so that the research may be appropriately informed; and perhaps also the terms used in their measures may be accordingly adapted (also see later). Methodologically, the findings of this chapter suggest that the participants may have different and complex perceptions regarding the other party, which might impose some limitation/challenge for the predominant quantitative studies. I will now conclude this chapter and provide a concise answer to research question 3.

6.5 Conclusion and Contribution

The data included in this chapter were collected to answer the research question of *who is considered 'the other party' in the employment relationship by Chinese workers?* The data analyses suggest that the majority of the participants thought the other party to be either the employing company or the most immediate powerful organisational representatives. The data also indicate that while the participants might acknowledge the company as the other party of their contractual employment relationship, they generally believed the immediate superiors had more control in their work life. Marginal interpretations also included 'country', 'client' and 'self' as the other party of employment exchanges.

The in-depth analyses of the data show that the relationships at work in China are more complicated than the existing literature suggests, especially given the inclusion of employment arrangements involving socialist interventions. The discussions reveal that

while the findings of this chapter may be argued to be in line with the psychological contract assumptions, there seems to be several important issues that have been overlooked in the existing research, especially in the Chinese context. The role of leadership, government and power relations at work on the psychological contract is suggested to be currently underrepresented in the existing literature. In a similar light, it is suggested that the diversity in employment arrangements and varied work contexts in China have been neglected, despite their argued essentiality in understanding power related issues and thus psychological contracts. From methodological perspectives, the terms used to represent the other party in empirical studies may need careful considerations. Different terms (e.g., ‘company’ and ‘supervisor’) may signify different relationships of exchanges at work and thus reflect different psychological realities. In addition, some terms in Chinese may carry unfamiliar cultural/linguistic implications that might impact on responses (e.g., ‘employer’ in Chinese).

These findings and discussions lead to three important contributions to the literature. From the methodological point of view, the findings provide preliminary empirical support for Rousseau’s (2011) advice that examinations are necessary on how the other party should be appropriately reflected in the empirical study, especially on the role of immediate supervisors in psychological contracts. Essentially, the findings of this chapter reveal the complexity of the Chinese employment, providing empirical evidence to suggest that the dynamic contextual considerations are significant for the management research in China in general, the psychological contract in particular. From the psychological contract perspective, this is the first empirical study that attempted to

address the issue of the other party from the participant's perspective; the findings indicate that the perceived the other party may not always be straightforward as assumed in the literature. Such perceptions are likely to involve more complex power relations and dynamics at work. Chapter 7 extends findings in this light and focuses on the workers' perceptions of implicit employment terms in China.

Chapter 7 Implicit Employment Terms in China

This chapter presents data collected to answer the research question: *How do Chinese workers describe their perceptions of implicit employment terms?* Extending from Chapter 6, an immediate effect stemming from the complex mixture of participants from a diversified employment (and personal) context was the considerable difficulty in analysing their accounts. The initial coding was very helpful for the holistic sense-making of the dataset and to derive the perceived implicit employment terms from the participant perspective. However, they were judged to be less adequate to answer the research question in relation to the psychological contract. This was because while the initial themes demonstrated the concerned accounts of the participants, they explained relatively little about how such beliefs were fostered and/or constrained by the complex contextual factors. This means that the findings of the initial data analyses produced *common* perceptions of the participants without adequate reflections of their idiosyncratic contexts. The dissatisfaction with the initial findings led to some important methodological reflections of the psychological contract in general, and this research in particular. A direct result of these reflections for this chapter was a re-orientation of the data analysis. Instead of the initially adopted cross-case coding approach, the data was coded case by case, checked by a cross-case approach and cross-checked with the initial codes from the opening coding. These procedures were significantly time-consuming but proved to be fruitful. The findings are presented in the following sections.

Before turning to data analyses, two notes are in order. First, the themes were inherently

inclusive and thus the coded text usually involved/explained more than one theme of the findings. Accordingly, it has been very challenging to discuss a theme without involving the others. For reasons of efficiency, these themes were organised and presented in a sequence that would minimise going back and forth between the codes and text. Second, as explained above, the focus of the analyses below is not what the implicit employment terms were but the common themes which emerged during the discussions with the participants regarding their related experiences and beliefs. By directing the reader's attention away from the actual employment terms described by the participants, the analyses may be better positioned to avoid the pitfall of focusing on commonality which is not what the psychological contract is conceptualised to study. From another perspective, given the relatively large sample from diversified backgrounds, it was not feasible to analyse individual cases in light of the highly contextual employment beliefs of the participants, or rather, their psychological contracts. On balance, the analyses of this chapter provide a sufficient number of direct quotes shedding light on the actual implicit employment terms discussed by the participants; or at the very least, the organisation of the theses should provide the reader adequate context in regard to several critical factors influencing the participants' implicit employment beliefs. These factors were organised into three themes that explain the perceived zone of negotiability, particularly in relation to the employment context (Section 7.1); the societal context of employment that contributed to the participants' perception of poor states of power (Section 7.2); and, the important role of leaders in China from the perspective of power dynamics at work (Section 7.3). The penultimate section discusses the findings in light of the existing literature before a conclusion section that attempts to provide a concise

answer to the final research question of this research.

7.1 Perceived Zone of Negotiability

A foremost factor that impacted on the participants' perceived zone of negotiability was the different employment arrangements that constrained what the participants could negotiate in the employment context. Generally, the perceived zone of negotiability appeared to decrease as the socialist interventions increased in the employment terms. This was not surprising as the socialist employment terms were probably more centrally determined than those that were individually negotiated (see Chapter 6). Following on from this, the degree of rigidity of employment terms seemed to reflect the level of the socialist intervention. At one extreme, for example, the workers may '*earn the same salaries*' (Wilson). As the employment terms and benefits were said to be centrally planned and largely standardised, Penelope appeared to have anticipated her future salaries according to her possible future ranking(s) in the system:

...you have always known the levels of monetary rewards in the system...From where I am today, i.e., ranked as a Deputy Section Chief, to a Section Chief – which'd probably take me a life time if I got lucky – and even then there'd probably only be an increase in salary of about a few hundred Yuan.

This perceived rigidity of employment was particularly salient since Penelope was quite young (31-year-old) and promoted within three years after she first joined as a civil

servant. Yet, the participant clearly found her career uncontrollable. As she put it: *'It seems there's really nothing like expectations, including things like appointment and dismissal or promotions. I think it is not just an issue of my own effort'*. This perception seemed to relate to a non-negotiated transfer:

When I first heard about the transfer, I felt disgusted. It's like there was no warning, completely no pre-communication; and the next second – I was transferred.

Accordingly, the personnel management in the socialist system appeared to be less voluntary and subject to little negotiation: *'what of your unwillingness? You got to understand your rank in the hierarchy'* (Wilson). This suggested hierarchy of authority was explained by Louis as below:

The system...is probably like semi-military; it is coming down from the hierarchy....Things here need no explanation or something. It's already formed the routine. There's no way around it to negotiate. It's fixed – the system and the pattern are already fixed.

The rigid employment terms appeared to have impacted on the perceptions regarding future employment possibilities. Louis was desperate as his *'heart has been long dead'* since his late 20s in terms of career advancement or better employment bargains. When asked for clarification, he said:

Your heart wants to die. Do you understand? ... You've reached the end of the road. There's no way around it... Even if there was a little tiny bit hope, the heart can't be called 'dead'.

Louis explained that he *'had the thoughts'* and *'tried'* when he first joined. But after a few attempts, he quickly realised that there was no hope to get promoted without appropriate *'guanxi'*. The belief that *'guanxi'* was *the* deciding factor in terms of implicit employment deals was salient among the in-system and out-system workers in the socialist employment context. For example, Wilson said: *"how many people got up the system for their capabilities? All are based on 'guanxi'!"*. This perceived unlikelihood of negotiable employment terms based on own efforts tended to result in some passive attitudes toward work. According to Victoria, a socialist worker on the *'voluntary position'* (see Chapter 6), work was simply *'punch in, punch out, hanging around...and oh, dawdling about'*. When asked whether she had thought about career development, she explained:

Not like I've never thought about it; the point is that it's useless to think about it. It's such a simple fact: you'll get it (i.e., promotion) if your family got 'guanxi', it's wasting time to even think about it if not.

When discussing the open government examination systems for recruiting socialist workers, Victoria showed a similar perception: *"useless, simply useless. There are*

exams for that, there are. But you know you won't get it even if you score the exam....It's clear – all those who got 'in' or 'up' the system had 'guanxi'". Relatively speaking, the perceptions regarding implicit employment deals among the socialist workers tended to be insignificant. Although personal and other context had some influences on individual beliefs, such influences tended to be weaker compared to their capitalist counterparts (see later). For example, when discussing career advancement, Penelope thought:

I know it not...just depends on personal capabilities. But...objectively, it's not possible that everyone got up the ladder through 'guanxi', right? Because there must still be some people who actually do the work, isn't it? Therefore, I'd first need to be the kind of people who are prepared to do the hard work; but second, I won't hold too much hope – you'd get disappointed otherwise.

Compared to, for example, Wilson, Louis and Victoria, Penelope seemed more hopeful. This was probably because she was young, highly educated, relatively inexperienced in the socialist employment and had had a minor promotion without 'guanxi'. These personal context and employment experiences seemed to have influenced Penelope's perceptions. In contrary, Wilson and Louis were over 45 years old, less educated and had 'seen' more about how the socialist employment system had operated. Understandably, they both had little to talk about negotiated deals or even expectations, which were somewhat different from Penelope. Comparatively, the employment context for the out-system socialist workers seemed even less hopeful: for example, whereas

Penelope's employment arrangement at least permitted internal routes for career advancements, Victoria's contract with the government had precluded her from getting promotion before she became an 'in-system' worker. These contexts probably had contributed to their different employment beliefs as shown above. A final revealing note in this light: among the national civil servant jobs (i.e., Penelope's employment), the most competitive recruitment rate in 2013 was 9,470 applications to one position (Huatu.com, 2015).

On the other hand, the workers under the capitalist employment arrangements had more flexible deals, *'reflected in the many details communicated between you and the company...like company benefits and other factors'* (Joe). The zone of negotiability appeared to be wider and there appeared to be possibilities in negotiating implicit deals between parties according to each party's needs and expectations. For example, when giving examples of implicit employment promises, Joe said the following:

Maybe the company has a position that only you are capable to fill...then they might promise you something to persuade you to do the job...You probably expect...a more or less equal return...but only realise – after having trusted the company and done the job –...the original promises were little fulfilled....But when you choose to quit, they might make up some stories to coerce you to stay...because they really need you for the moment.

Although mostly in their broken forms, the implicit promises/expectations indicated in

the above suggest that there were at least perceived zones of negotiability at work. When discussing the negotiated deals with the company, the examples given by the participants were diversified. Sara talked about commissions and bonuses; Frank thought his company should consider a looser policy on dressing codes; Lucy complained about regulations regarding bunching schedules; Angela wanted timely support from her company regarding sales; and, Caroline discussed about work and promotion. It was very difficult to infer commonality of such data, except that these examples were predominantly broken deals by the employer.

One relatively conclusive finding regarding the zone of negotiability among the capitalist workers was that it appeared highly contextual. The deals the participants had, or wanted to have, with their employers seemed to be always in line with both the nature of the work and their personal preferences. I will discuss this with an example given by Aaron regarding his perceptions of implicit employment terms; when asked why he thought his employer should permit personal leaves during the Chinese New Year holiday, Aaron said:

I think the practice may be negotiated because, in fact, the work isn't that busy during the period. I think it shouldn't be a big deal if we had a rotation to take a couple of days off.

There are a few notes to make the above example illuminating. First, the company's practice that *'we usually have no holidays during the Chinese New Year'* was probably

because the project Aaron worked on included, primarily, remote IT support to serve clients in New Zealand and Australia. Understandably, the company wanted the employees to follow the public holidays in accordance with the client's. Nevertheless, Aaron thought that *'although the company...pays a triple salary to remedy'* the lost holiday during the Chinese New Year, he would still prefer to take the days off *'because this holiday is highly valued in China...and I think it is very important that we have a family reunion once a year'*. A particular note about Aaron's case was that he worked away from his hometown and had no family in Xiamen, where he worked, which would explain his personal preference to use the holiday to see his family. Interestingly, this issue did not seem to bother his co-workers as much. For example, when talking about employment benefits, Jeremy, Aaron's colleague, said:

If you think from the company's perspective, say, if the company gave me 15 days annual leaves, this would mean that my position was vacant for 15 days and the company would need to cover the cost to my clients. So, I don't think the issue about leaves is a big deal.

Jeremy's above opinion was arguably related to the fact that his family lived in Xiamen. As a team leader working on an agency contract, Jeremy's emphasis seemed to be on the coordination between his team on the client company: he described in detail his frustration in trying to communicate with several parties to negotiate the working relationship with a peer at his client company. Brian, another teammate of Aaron, actually preferred to have the triple salary over the Chinese New Year, probably because

his family was in the USA: *'I am all by myself and got nowhere to go anyway. Everywhere is either closed or overly crowded during the Chinese New Year – I'd rather take the money'*.

Regarding the zone of negotiability, some of Brian's thoughts were striking. In discussing implicit employment terms, Brian commented that extra work duties were things *'you will still need to do'*; when asked to clarify whether he meant *'should do'* or *'had to do'*, Brian said *'half-half'* and explained (highlights are his English words):

Brian: Hmm, because...I had lived abroad. If in the working environment abroad, I'd say this is not something I should do – it belongs to...extra work that will occupy your extra time. But in the current company, I think I should do...There's perhaps a concept that whatever your boss asks you to do are just...what have to be accomplished.

Interviewer: Where did this 'concept' come from?

Brian: I don't know – maybe a kind of habit.

Interviewer: You said that it was not like this when you lived abroad. So how has this habit been formed?

Brian: Hmm....If you were working abroad and your boss asked you to do some extra work, you'd choose to communicate with him or refuse to do it. But then if in China, you

wouldn't fight; wouldn't fight for it. There're no human rights in China – is this how they say it?

Brian emphasised that *'it is a different concept abroad'*, indicating his clear awareness of the socio-cultural differences between 'abroad' and China. His comments were quite unexpected not only because he had studied, worked and lived in the UK and the USA for more than 10 years before returning to China, but also because he was a young (32-year-old) and highly qualified white-collar working at a MNC: he was the least expected participant to feel prone to the indigenous employment practices/beliefs. Nevertheless, the data suggests that Brian's comments reflected the majority, if not all, participants' related societal beliefs, which had remarkable impacts on the perceptions of the implicit employment terms in China. I will discuss these issues in the next section.

7.2 Societal Context for Employment

The data in this section indicate a perceived weak legal provision of labour rights in China, leading to the perception of poor states of power, to varied degrees, among the interviewed Chinese workers. Since the basic employment terms might not be effectively protected, a surprising observation was that some participants expressed some levels of satisfaction even when the employer did not fully fulfil the legal obligations. For example:

Compared to many companies and bosses I experienced before, the company

and the boss treat us very well...Because, for example, public holidays that kind of thing... – except the Housing Fund – other social and health insurances (see the footnote) are all provided....The other companies don't even pay for the social and health insurances, never mind the Housing Fund.... At least we got public holidays.

Sara

Arguably due to the common organisational practices of ignoring the legal obligations, the legality of contractual employment terms seemed to fall under the zone of negotiability. According to Angela:

I feel like...social and health insurances should be provided...But the Five Insurances and One Fund¹⁶ may be not: many enterprises are not paying for them; it is a normal phenomenon.

Since some legal obligations might '*not be clearly said*' (Angela), such obligations were probably not specified in the contract and became terms open for negotiation. Yet, the contract itself did not seem to be effectively practiced/enforced in the Chinese context, leading some participants to believe that the contract had little value:

¹⁶ These refer to the legally required employer contribution to five types of employee insurance and one type of fund, including social/pension, health, work-related injury, maternity and unemployment insurances, and the Housing Fund. Angela meant that only the social and health insurances, out of all, were implicitly expected to be provided by the employer based on 'standard' practices.

The contract has no value....(because) there is always a final clause that allows Party A (i.e., the employer) to fire Party B (i.e., the employee) for any change at Party A's side....This is not like...firing you...for your poor performances. It is a different concept....So the contract is almost useless....For example, I have signed a two years contract but may well be kicked off just like that after a year.

Kevin

The scenario seemed even poorer when the participants had no contract at all. For example, when discussing the legally required employment benefits such as annual and sick leaves, the interview with Ellison went as follows:

Ellison: This company is better: if you take a day's leave, they deduct two days' salary.

Researcher: Why?

*Ellison: I have no idea who the f*****g stupid made that rule.*

Researcher: Did you know this when you joined the company?

Ellison: ...the rule came out a month after I joined. It's just stupid. We have a colleague with a monthly salary of 3,500 Yuan. He applied for two days' leave and (his salary) was deducted for...almost 700 Yuan, because two days' leave means four days' salary deduction....

Researcher: How did you all react to that?

*Ellison: Suck it up or f*****g leave.*

Researcher: 'Suck' the anger up?

Ellison: Not really 'angry', just feeling ridiculous – if I didn't work the first half of the month, would I have to work the second half for free just to 'make it up' to you?!...

Researcher: Eventually you accepted it?

*Ellison: Or else? Told you, you just have to suck it up or f*****g leave.*

As clearly indicated above, in extreme cases whereby the participants perceived no power to enforce the basic legal terms, the zone of negotiability was believed to disappear. Related to this, the low confidence in the legal system was a significant factor in determining the perceived zone of negotiability. Same as Ellison, Eric was an agency worker but had no contract. Eric said: *'the agency takes half of what I get.... It exploits too much but takes no responsibility at all.... Not even a contract'*. When asked whether he knew that he would be recognised as a permanent worker by the Chinese labour law – even without a contract – because he had worked for his employer for over 10 years, Eric said:

The law came out a long while ago....If you don't want to work anymore, you can sue them...but...nobody would take you in after that...You might join another industry, but nowhere would hire you here anymore...They

show no mercy – it is just how it is in China.

The data analysis suggests that there was a strong belief among the Chinese workers that the legal system was ineffective to protect the labour rights. This shared belief appeared to result in a significant reluctance to take legal actions against the employer's breach of obligations among both the capitalist and socialist workers. For example, when asked why not take it to court of a believed unlawful work practice at his bureau, Wilson said:

Power is above the law! The court is accountable to the government; the government leads the court and the prosecution service – who could you sue? You can't: there's no way you could fight a case against the government.

Still, the highly centralised socialist employment terms seemed to provide some form of standardisation that probably reduced the chances of the employer breaching legal agreements. Accordingly, the issue of poorly practiced contracts had more devastating implications for the capitalist workers (see examples above, except Wilson). Socialist workers, on the other hand, were protected by their rigid employment terms *but only in a comparative sense* (see later). Consequently, while the socialist workers commonly resented at least some elements of their work experiences, they also showed the awareness of their 'privileged' employment conditions: *'you either fight back or comply. The result of fighting back is that you leave the system – many people are dying to come*

in – would you fight back and leave?’ (Lisa).

Notwithstanding the relatively well regulated employment, the data analysis suggests that the socialist workers showed low confidence in the Chinese legal systems just as their capitalist counterparts did; as Lisa commented in her helpless tone:

Those protected by the laws and regulations in China are the upper classes, not the ordinary people...The ordinary people believe, in their hearts that, ‘Nobody can protect me’. These laws have no use to us....We could but only succumb to reality.

Noticeably, the unlawful work practices reported by the socialist workers concerned more about advanced employment benefits (e.g., annual/sick leaves), additional incomes (e.g., bonuses) and/or extra work (e.g., involuntary overtime); whereas the capitalist workers were concerned more about the basic employment terms (e.g., salary, public holidays, mandatory employment related insurances). Ken, a client manager at a state-owned public company, expressed bitter sentiments regarding his employment experiences:

When I was interviewed, the HR specialist told me that the employees were entitled for sick leaves and blah-blah leaves and rights. But when I really got sick, you know what our branch leader told me? – sick leaves were counted as annual leaves, meaning if I get sick...my annual leave days get

deducted by the days applied for the sick leaves....

When asked why he did not take legal actions against it, Ken became agitated and ascribed the issue to the societal context:

Legal actions? Are you out of your mind?!...Do you really think it'd make any sense to sue?!... Do you know how many employees are there in the industry in Xiamen? If I couldn't organise at least 1/3 of us to push back, would there be any effect? No, and there's no way they'd unite and fight back. Submissiveness, the weakness embedded in the Chinese people to 'suffer and obey'. You sue all you want overseas – but in China, you can't afford to fight against the system.

This alleged 'submissiveness' among Chinese workers, unfortunately, did appear to be strongly supported by the data analysis, most notably reflected by the high power distance inscribed in the Chinese culture (see next section). Before turning to the next theme, a few notes are in order. First, it needs to be clarified that the data revealed significantly fewer reported outright contract breaches from participants who worked in local governments, bureaus or solely state-owned enterprises, regardless of them being 'in-system' or 'out-system'. The less educated, on the other hand, tended to work on more informal employment arrangements and thus be exposed to more illegal practices. Similarly, the participants from smaller and/or private companies seemed to have experienced more incidents of breaches of contract. For the interest of this thesis, it

must also be stressed that it was the *belief* of, e.g., ‘*there’re no human rights in China*’ (Brian), that mattered a great deal to the findings. In turn, the belief that labour rights were not well protected was virtually identified in the interviews with all the Chinese workers. An especially convincing example in this light was Jay, a fresh Masters graduate from a top-tier British university. When interviewed on his very first day working at a state-owned public company in Xiamen, Jay said:

In China, this contract thing is relatively disregarded....I signed it, but really that’s all about it...It’s basically just for the formality to have a contract; it got many holes and unregulated areas. The contract is not that legalised.

The above is so demonstrative that it shows the concerned societal beliefs penetrated even among the highly educated, exposed to western societies and worked in formal/public sectors in China. Jay said ‘*I’ve just started to work*’ and acknowledged his little experience; yet, he commented:

But according to the current situation in China,...many things are not on the paper...and thus there’s a lot of inequality and uncertainty....Relatively speaking, the employing party has the upper hand...while the employed is lacking...legal protections.

Understandably, such shared beliefs led to the perception of lower levels of power

among workers, which in turn resulted in the acceptance, though unwillingly, of implicit employment terms that were less than specified in the contract and/or protected by the law. The data analysis also indicates that the degree of the perceived power privation appeared to vary according to employment and personal context. The next section focuses on a specific context regarding the role of leaders.

7.3 Leaders and Leader Powers in Employment

Considering the perceived unreliability of the contract and weak legal protections, it may not be difficult to understand why the most salient theme revealed by the data analysis was a power dependence relationship with the leader. The weak legal mechanisms to protect labour rights, or at least the beliefs of it, imply a perception of, possibly amplified, power imbalance between the employee and the employer in the Chinese context. Since little guarantee was believed to exist from the legal perspective, the most fundamental basis of the employment relationship was arguably broken down, leading to the loss of trust based on formal arrangements:

It is not the question of trust – what can you still believe? The already fixed deals could be changed anytime. Nobody believes anything anymore; there's simply compliance – trust exists no more. There are regulations; there are labour laws: but all these could be overruled, what else can be trusted?

Lisa

In place of the formal foundation of the employment relationship, it was the informal relationships at work that appeared to offer some certainty at work. Not surprisingly, the person who had most direct influences over the work, i.e., the work superior, was perceived to be of primary importance in the employment relationship (see Chapter 6) and thus a primary source of power dependence. The data analysis suggests that the weak administrative effectiveness resulted in the enhanced power of the leader in deciding the employment terms/treatments of the participants, which in turn fostered a 'concept', as Brian put it (see above), that the leader's comments were implicit employment obligations. The below interview excerpt with Kevin, who moved out from the socialist employment into the private sector, may provide an illuminating example:

Researcher: Why whatever the boss asks must be done at work?

Kevin: Why? Because he is in charge of you – it is the simplest fact – he decides your benefits at work.

Researcher: But I thought you said the other party at work was the company?

Kevin: But the boss can decide many off-the-book stuff, for example, some bonuses, etc.. It's entirely the leader's call.

Researcher: Is it not according to the company regulations?

Kevin: That's right. It's not!...It has nothing to do with the regulations...For example, there's probably a budget for your department, but your leader has the right to allocate the money....so you've got to do what the leader says....

Researcher: Was it like this even when you were working at the state-owned enterprise before?

Kevin: That's right – it's all the same.

Researcher: But you said the regulations got improved later – they still didn't work?

Kevin: No...it's still the leader who decided.

Unfortunately, the powerful position of the leader, against the background of poor formal protections for the workers, was reported by the participants to have led to a range of power abuses and/or unethical leader behaviours. For example,

It's like what the leader said: 'if you got resources, why don't you go somewhere else? If you can't go anywhere else, then just listen and comply – don't come to work if you got what it takes to leave'....The leader said: '...go out of the system if you can'.

Louis

An obvious example of power abuse at work was given by Wilson when he was asked to clarify what he meant by that his work was *'just to serve the leader'*:

...I think you can understand this example: if there's a charity event...it's like: 'Donation! One hundred Yuan per head!' – salary deducted; it's done.... It's just an oral notice with an explicit number to

donate: ...could you donate less? Not possible!...There's no way around it. The leader's word is everything....We don't even ask....Who knows where the money has gone? Nobody....Isn't it what the Chinese say? – there's no way around it!

As implied by the above, a negative ramification of the believed unbridgeable power gaps between the employer and the employee as well as between the superior and the subordinate, was the reluctance to communicate. Or simply, *'there's nothing to talk about'* when it comes to the *'leader's management style'* (Lucy). Arguably due to the better protected employment terms in the socialist employment and thus the understandable reluctance to leave it, the socialist workers perceived more power gaps with their leaders and less willingness to communicate. For example:

Putting it bluntly – the job I got – if you are not happy about it you just leave; there's no need to talk about it. I am telling you, ...there's a queue lining up wanting the job.

Victoria

Similarly, when asked whether he talked to his leader regarding a series of problems he mentioned during the interview, Ken became agitated (again) and said:

A conversation with the leader? Are you in your right mind? I don't want to

Speak to the leader – it's just such a simple fact. I never communicate with the leader – it's impossible....I just don't want to talk to the leader....There's nothing in the relationship. I don't even know what to say when we meet: sometimes we meet in the toilet, we just nod. That's it....To be honest, talking much is just rubbish; talk more, err more.

The reluctance to communicate with the leader was probably also due to the perceived lack of choice that, in turn, may be explained not only by the power gaps at work but also the cultural power distance:

We don't...have a choice. In the Chinese context, you can't say 'No' to the leader – it is a very normal social phenomenon....Then if the leader...says: 'You do this work', I'll accept it despite, actually, being unwillingly to do it.

Bell

As Brian suggested (see Section 7.2), the concept of 'doing what the boss asks' probably had a cultural element to it, i.e., 'a habit'. When asked that on what ground the judgement was made that he had to do what the superior commended, Jason, a supervisory IT professional in Xiamen, explained:

Emmm, the simplest ground is: the boss asks you to do, you just do it. Normally speaking, it is just so....Because there is a hierarchical

relationship in an enterprise; in a hierarchical relationship, when a superior asks a subordinate to do something, I think, there is not much space to argue.

The cultural influence on the concept of hierarchy was elucidated by Hannah, who directly used her upbringing to explain why *'no matter in what kind of enterprise – anyway in China it is like this – it is simply that you will do whatever your superior says'*:

In China, it is rather similar to that when your mom asks you to do something, you'd be undutiful if you didn't comply....So, it's best that you just listen – don't argue or ask anything. You only comply. I think it's inevitable to have the concept when you have grown up being inscribed with such teachings. Sometimes I just wanted to know the reason, but the elders would tell it off to you face: 'What for you ask so much? Just listen, don't speak'Then when you start working, say,...your leader might, for example, ask you to go and buy a cup of tea because s/he wants it..., so you apply the concept and think: the leader's words are my duties too...So I could just put down what I am supposed to do for my own work and go buy the tea....This is simple and straightforward enough – I think it is like this in many enterprises.

The cultural and unquestioned nature of the hierarchical power of the leader became

clearer when Hannah was asked to clarify whether she *'would call it obligation, promise, responsibility, or guarantee, or perhaps expectation'* regarding what the leader asked her to do; she said: *'I think none of these is relevant...It is just...the leader asks you to do something....so you just do it already'*.

It is essential to clarify that – as already suggested by the examples above – not challenging the authority did not seem to imply the willingness to comply. The data analysis indicates that the normative submissiveness was oftentimes against the participant's will. It is also important to point out that the reluctance to communicate implies an unwillingness to negotiate, which in turn could result in a narrower zone of negotiation *in effect*. However, it does not, in and by itself, necessarily impact on the cognitive knowledge of the zone of negotiability. This means that while the perceived zone of negotiability emphasises the perception of what could be bent (Section 7.1), the reluctance to communicate emphasises the unwillingness to negotiate. Bargaining powers, on the other hand, might impact on both the perceived zone of negotiability and the willingness to negotiate. Though marginal in the data, some highly qualified participants, especially those working in private sectors, showed some perceived powers to accept or reject a term. An example was given by Nicolas:

For example, if the boss says 'You go and develop a new project'I'd judge it against my capabilities...and see whether it relates to my own benefit...If it's beyond my scope but you just always had to ask me to do it...I might not do it.

A critical, though not the only, resource in enhancing the bargaining powers of the participants appeared to be the personal relationship with the leader. For example, Jeremy argued over a particular work issue with his peer supervisor at the client's company *'for more than 10 times within the year'*. He said: *'If the problem continues, I'll probably request for a transfer'* and explained *'because, after all, I have a good relationship with their boss...and my boss has a good relationship with me'*. Accordingly, the data analysis suggests that the reciprocity with the superior represented a relationship of power dependence. For example:

You work here and are directly under the leader: if you don't do well what the leader asks, s/he won't consider you, for example, when there's some benefit. Moreover, if you didn't handle the relationship well, the leader would probably make it difficult for you at work day after day....I'd rather do the extra work...to feel a bit psychologically relaxed....So...there's probably also an exchange element in it – through doing extra work to exchange for the leader's 'good face'.

Sabrina

As indicated above, the power dependence relationship with the leader did not seem to conflict with the concept of exchange, although the working mechanisms of such exchanges might potentially differ from that of the psychological contract. I will now discuss these findings in the next section.

7.4 Discussion and Implication

A foremost issue revealed by the findings relates to power, which evidently affected the perception of implicit employment terms. While the findings of this chapter do suggest that the participants had some beliefs regarding implicit employment terms, such terms, in general, seemed distant from the assumptions of the psychological contract: psychological contracts assume that the implicit employment deals are beyond and *above* the basic contract, whereas the participants appeared to believe that implicit employment terms were largely beyond but *below* the contract, albeit not exclusively (e.g., off-the-book benefits as mentioned by Kevin). A helpful explanation may be offered by Rousseau (2000a; 2001; 2003; also see Rousseau & Schalk, 2000) who emphasises the importance of relative equal powers between parties in order to give rise to the psychological contract. This advice, however, raises two curious queries: how do we define ‘relative equal powers’ and does this condition of relative power balance always present in the empirical research settings? The second query relates to the issue of generalisability and will be discussed in Chapter 8. I will attempt to provide some critical reflections on power in relation to the existing literature below.

7.4.1 Power and the Psychological Contract

Given that the findings appear rather convincing that the majority, if not all, of the workers suggested that there was probably a significant power gap between parties of employment exchanges, a foremost question to consider is that whether the findings could be explained, or to what extent, by the existing theory. Would psychological contracts, assuming the implicit employment beliefs of the participants could be so

named, formed in relatively equal and unequal power relations be possibly explained by the same theory, function the same way and have the same consequences? Rousseau's theory (e.g., Rousseau, 2000a; 2001) explains that there is a decreasing likelihood of mutuality when the power is imbalanced, but what happens when such imbalance becomes too huge to even bring two parties into a *promise-based* negotiation? This is important because Rousseau (2001) is very clear about her theoretical stance that only promise-based negotiations result in psychological contract beliefs – be it promise, obligation and/or expectation (Rousseau, 2011). Assuming there is a threshold level of power imbalance to form psychological contracts, i.e., willing exchange commitments, and bearing in mind that they are not based on threats (Rousseau, 2001), the existing theory might not be able to explain implicit binding expectations in the employment context whereby the power was greatly imbalanced between the employee and the employer; under such circumstances, the employee may form implicit employment beliefs below the contract terms, such as indicated in the findings of this chapter.

While the issue on promise has been discussed in Chapter 5, the above discussions hints toward another potential theoretical limitation that the psychological contract assumptions seem to largely relate to a specific set of social exchange assumptions, i.e., reciprocity (see Rousseau, 1989). Not surprisingly, reciprocity or reciprocal rules (e.g., Sahlins, 1972) has been favoured in the social exchange-based theories/constructs (see e.g., Wayne, et al., 2009), including the psychological contract (e.g., Hu, Tetrick & Shore, 2011; Parzefall, 2008). On the other hand, general discussions on power in the psychological contract seems to subside, giving way to a specific type of power relating

to the bargaining powers or the zone of negotiability (Rousseau, 1995). This may be unwise. Although it is understandable that Sahlin's (1965) theory is favoured, it may seem less in line with Blau (1964) whose social exchange theory is fundamentally explained in economic terms and specifically relates to power (1964a). In this light, for example, Pen's (1959) classical theory on power in labour-management negotiations, though intuitively appealing, has not been discussed in the literature. A particularly promising direction in this regard may be Emerson's (1962) approach to the social exchange that features power-dependence relations, especially in light of the findings of this chapter. While this strand of literature is out of the present scope, it may be rewarding for the future research to pursue in this light. Before turning to the issue of societal context, it may also be potentially fruitful for scholars to reflect on the changes in the world of work and employment in the recent half a century, so that a better judgement could be made on the generalisability of the norm of reciprocity (Sahlin, 1965; Gouldner, 1960) in the present era of employment. For example, Sahlin's (1965) theory was originally based on his ethnographic study on the normative practices in primitive exchanges, which was reasonably based on long-term relationships. Since reciprocity is normative, it requires a sufficient familiarity with/in the relationship to establish. While it may indeed underpin the studies of employment exchanges for those in a condition of more stable and long-term employment, it is important to note that the recent changes in the employment context may have made the condition difficult to obtain for a considerable portion of workers: the findings of this thesis indicate that this is especially so in the Chinese context. In this light, Rousseau (2005) is probably right in promoting the concept of i-deals among the highly qualified professionals in

extending the psychological contract, although there has been a curious observation that the rest, and majority, of the labour force was studied with similar assumptions in the existing empirical research (also see Chapter 8).

In extending the discussion on power and psychological contract, the next subsection discusses some fundamental roles of society, in part revealed by Rousseau and Schalk (2000) argue that various aspects of social context may play a fundamental role in giving rise to psychological contract and ‘a key role in legitimating the terms of psychological contracts’ (p19).

7.4.2 Role of Societal Context

The findings of this chapter point to an essential role of societal context in relation to the workers’ beliefs of employment conditions, which in turn shaped their perceptions of implicit employment terms. Although the literature generally suggests a need for an integrated picture of societal influences (e.g., Rousseau & Schalk, 2000; Sparrow, 1998; Rousseau, 2011; also see Westwood, Sparrow & Leung, 2001; Cassar & Briner, 2009), the majority of the research primarily focuses on culture, especially in the Chinese context (e.g., Hornung & Rousseau, 2012). The findings of this chapter suggest this narrow focus on culture is unwise; this section offers a discussion on the related issues.

To begin with, in inspiring research on the role of society for the psychological contract, Rousseau and Schalk (2000) collected 13 cross-national cases to make a synthesis, suggesting that societal structures and institutions may impact significantly on the

emergence and formation of psychological contracts. Nonetheless, there has been little scholarly attention devoted to this area of research. The findings of this chapter suggest that this negligence in the psychological contract literature is risky, especially given that ‘psychological contracts are a subjective phenomenon not only individually but culturally’ (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000, p4). An illustrative example in the literature may be a Harvard case study of Euro Disney (Anthony, Loveman & Schlesinger, 1992, p11; adapted from source material due to reasons of space):

Within the first nine weeks of operation roughly 1,000 employees left about half of whom left voluntarily. At a Fantasyland shop, by the first weekend the entire shop personnel had changed and the last member left after a dispute with his supervisor over the timing of his lunch break. A crew member commented: ‘I don’t think they (supervisors) realized what Europeans were like...that we ask questions and don’t think all the same’.

The HRM nightmare experienced by Disney in Paris reveals several important issues of psychological contracts in different societies. The communication barriers between the American management and the French crew members reflected cultural differences in perceptions, preferred communication styles and frames of references for interpretations. The strength of social protection systems determined that workers in France could quit their employment freely and the Disney could easily terminate employees within the first two years of employment after which the termination procedures would become stringent (Anthony, Loveman & Schlesinger, 1992). The above example also indicates

that the articulation of the role of societal context is difficult, especially that the interplay between culture and social structures is complex. This complexity is revealed by the findings of this chapter. For example, the perceived gap in power was jointly influenced by the Chinese hierarchical culture and the weak social protection of labour rights. Arguably, the former may have facilitated the latter by the general submissiveness among the Chinese workers, while the latter reinforced the former by transferring the pivotal power in the employment relationship to the leader/supervisor. Fundamentally, the employment terms – explicit or implicit – are always bargained against the backdrop of employment laws and legal contracts (Macaulay, 1985). The ‘zone of bargain’ – constrained or enforced by laws – has a tremendous impact on the creation, development and revision of psychological contracts (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). As an example, the transformation of social legislation on equity practices was found to have significant effects on psychological contracts among ethnic groups (Wöcke & Sutherland, 2008). In supporting these arguments and evidence, the findings of this chapter suggest that the workers’ perceptions of employment terms were significantly influenced by the ineffectively practiced/enforced legal contracts.

Related to the legal state, the role of government determines the power distribution in employment relationships, particularly through the levels of bargaining (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). As a third party to the industrial relation system, governments may directly intervene the employment agreements for certain groups of workers or sectors by imposing laws to specify employment conditions (Dunlop, 1993). Individual negotiations are much confined in a system where collective bargaining agreements or

state-set employment conditions prevail. The evidence from this research strongly supports these claims, especially in the socialist employment context wherein the perceived zone of negotiability was significantly confined (Section 7.1). This finding seems in line with the literature that the level of negotiation is influenced by the societal context. For example, while individualist agreements are popular in Israel, the US, New Zealand and Singapore, central agreements are more important in Australia, India, Mexico, Belgium and the Netherlands (cf., Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). In addition, central agreements tend to anchor the employment relationships in France and Japan (cf., Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). Consequently, the findings of this thesis also support that the power differences among employment parties may impact on employees' perceptions on who is responsible for keeping their employment terms (Rayner, 1991), i.e., parties to their psychological contracts (Chapter 6). Moreover, the literature suggests that the diversity in legal systems sets the foundation for distinguishable societal regulations governing the levels and accessibility of social protections. For example, government officials in India are well protected by secured employment but not such security is provided for other white-collar workers (Shah, 2000). In Europe, social protections for different types of nonstandard workers varied amongst the UK, Germany, Poland, Denmark, Italy and the Netherlands (Buschoff & Protsch, 2008). The findings of this chapter are highly in line with the literature, not the least self-evidently shown in the fact that there is a dual employment system in China and thus a dual legal system for managing workers in different employment systems (also see Chapter 6).

Suggested by the findings of this chapter and in line with the literature, a key factor is

the power relations between the employee and the employer, which has significant impact on employees' willingness and frequency to share information, freedom to contract terms, likelihood to engage in contract negotiations, and bargaining power (Rousseau, 2001). The degree and manifestations of such employee powers are closely linked to, amongst other factors (e.g., Rousseau, 2005), national cultures (Thomas et al., 2010) and social structures (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000); in turn, they relate to issues like power distance, degree of dependence, hierarchy and blanket regulations (see Section 7.4.1; Rousseau, 2001). Stability and liberty in a society produce trust and confidence in committing to future exchange (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000), hence underpins people's willingness to honour psychological contracts. This voluntariness of promise-making/keeping behaviours, in turn, is suggested to be a function of values (Sagie, 1993), culture (Krausz, 2000), social pressure (Rousseau, 1995), contextual dynamics and social stability (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). Therefore, reducing society's role (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000) to culture and culture alone (cf., Chapter 2) is inadequate in understanding psychological contracts in a given society. Nonetheless, despite the manifest cross-national differences and the complexity of social context within a single society, there is a devoid of systematic research on the psychological contract formation within a national context in light of culture, social protection/stability, societal regulations, industrial relations or employment relationships, making the comparison or conclusion at an international level almost impossible. The findings of this chapter and discussion of this section suggest that there is a primary necessity to study the psychological contract in relation to a carefully examined given societal context before claiming the generalisability of the theory at an international level,

although this does not in and by itself imply the lack of generalisability of the theory (see Chapter 8).

In summary, the discussion of this subsection appears highly supportive of Rousseau's (2011) recent advice in studying 'the values of the broader society...(that may) serve as a backdrop for interpreting psychological contracts', i.e., what she calls 'social contracts' referring to the 'obligations that are broadly agreed upon in a societal context' (p214). To avoid confusion with the 'social contract' historically used (e.g., Rousseau, 1762/1997), I refer to this concept as societal culture, which may be defined as 'a society's legal and cultural institutions interjected into conditions of employment' (Rousseau, 2011, p214). A core argument for studying societal culture involves the largely neglected role of society that essentially includes more structural aspects such as economic developments, legal systems, and political ideologies. Further research is particularly encouraged to pursue this direction.

7.4.3 Leader, Workplace Relationships and the Psychological Contract

In particular, the findings provide evidence for Hui, Lee and Rousseau's (2004) assumption that 'in China, reciprocity to important people in the workplace is a more meaningful concept than reciprocity to the abstract entity of an organization' (p315). By implication, this also supports the advice of managing psychological contracts through leadership (e.g., McDermott, Heffernan & Beynon, 2013). On the other hand, it seems to beg the question of what the employee's relationship with the supervisor signifies in the Chinese context: would psychological contracts between a worker and a supervisor

reflect the quality of relationship between them, the employment relationship between the worker and the employing organisation, or perhaps more complicated than either/both? Depending on different assumptions regarding this question, future discussions may need to address the issues of what kind of exchange relationship would the psychological contract more likely to capture in the Chinese employment context and what corresponding adaptations of its measures would be more appropriate in terms of the other party.

Moreover, if the supervisory relationship was assumed to be more important than, or largely represent, the general employment relationship in (Hui, Lee & Rousseau, 2004), what would be the significance of the psychological contract and/or its empirical studies in China, regarding the relationship between *the company* and the employee? For example, if the participant had little regard to the employer/company but viewed the supervisor as the other party with whom a highly relational psychological bond existed (e.g., Jeremy; see quotes included in sections 6.2 and 7.3), how would this, if at all, be captured by the existing operationalisations of the psychological contract featuring the employer/company in the measures? Would we conclude that the person had basic/poor psychological contracts in his/her employment relationship? Or rather, could we confidently infer that the person had a poor relationship with the employer/company, neglecting the possibility that the person might have had little to complain about the employer/company, but the supervisor simply had more power in deciding his/her employment terms? The preliminary evidence from this study suggests the research of Chinese employment without appropriate comprehension of leadership or workplace

power relations could be misguided. While there has been attention paid to supervisors/leaders in the literature (e.g., McDermott, Heffernan & Beynon, 2013; Kernan, Racicot & Fisher, 2016), future in-depth investigations and studies on the role of the supervisor, at least in the Chinese context, are needed.

In addition, if the Chinese people are assumed to be more personal relationship oriented and essential values are given to interpersonal relationships (Yang, 1995), what would be the practical significance or relevance for the organisation-employee relationship constructs in the research of work and organisation in China? Pan, Zhou and Zhou (2010) recently studied the role of leadership between the employees and the organisation in the Chinese context. They found that 'POS can not moderate the relationship between LMX and affective commitment' (p1). The implication is so striking that the exchange at work with leaders may be significantly independent from that with the organisation in the Chinese context, which begs the question of what Hui, Lee and Rousseau (2004) really measured by asking the Chinese workers regarding their perceived obligations to/by their supervisors. Perhaps, the discussions of this subsection also signal a reflection on the additional value in examining the employment relationship through the lens of psychological contracts over some other concepts that are specifically constructed to capture the dyadic relationships at work (e.g., Liden & Graen, 1980; for a discussion, see Anand, et al., 2010) in some contexts, especially in light of the puzzling empirical evidence in China (see Section 2.5.4). Specifically, the abuse of power by the Chinese leaders reflects the fact that some participants lacked even basic legal protections, rendering psychological contract negotiations unlikely to be possible. The

fundamental issue herein relates to the inadequacy of the psychological contract to represent employment relationships in the Chinese context, especially involving abusive leaders with whom a work relationship appeared to be based more on coercion than cooperation. The findings of this chapter and Chapter 6 seem convincing that the Chinese leaders are so powerful that the leadership in the Chinese context may not be a bridge but rather a ravine in the relationship between employees and organisations. Future research in this light is probably fruitful, especially in regard to destructive leadership behaviours (e.g., Einarsen, Aasland & Skogstad, 2007).

7.5 Conclusion and Contribution

This chapter was intended to answer the research question of *How do Chinese workers describe their perceptions of implicit employment terms?* The data analyses suggest that the critical factors relating to the participants' perceptions of their implicit employment terms included the perceived zone of negotiability, social context for employment and leadership powers at work. The data indicate that the employment context, i.e., socialist and capitalist employment arrangements, seemed to have had a primary influence on the zone of negotiability, while other factors may include the nature of employment and personal context, especially the relationship with the leader. A significant social context identified by the data analysis was the perceived weak social/legal protection for employment rights, resulting in the participants' belief of a privation of power in the employment. Another salient social context revealed by the data analysis was the cultural value of hierarchy, which had a profound influence on the perceived power distance/gap with the leader; this in turn related to a significant reluctance to

communicate and the frequently reported power abuses by the leaders in China. In summary, the findings suggest that the participants' perceptions of implicit employment terms were jointly influenced by the poor social protection, ineffective legal enforcement, high power distance culture, employment structure/arrangement, general submissiveness, and personal context. As a result, the data analysis indicates that the participants' perceived implicit employment terms prevalently involved elements below the contract terms in the Chinese context.

The discussions of the findings suggest that the existing psychological contract theory might not explain the perception of implicit employment terms of the participants, whereby the critical theoretical condition of relative equal power did not seem to apply in the widely surveyed employment arrangements in China. However, since the existing literature does not seem to explain the boundaries of relative equal power, and the empirical research appears to have assumed that the relative equality in power applies to all employment contexts/arrangements, it has been very challenging to define or explain how psychological contracts of the participants. However, it seems convincing that power has been understudied in the literature, although it may hold a key to one of the theoretical boundary conditions of the psychological contract. The discussions have also revealed an urgency to understand psychological contracts in a given society by study the phenomena against the background of the complex societal culture. It has been shown that the overemphasis on culture may be misleading, while there has been a curious lack of research following up Rousseau and Schalk (2000) who set clear research agenda for future research. This strand of research, however, may hopefully

attract more attention after Rousseau' (2011) recent reemphasis on the issue. Finally, the findings provide further support to that of Chapter 6 in suggesting that workplace relationships may be more complex in China, especially in light of its dual employment system and the particularly powerful leaders in the general workplace. The weaker formal powers of workers due to the ineffective legal system and the high power distance appear to be salient in the Chinese context, which is worthy of a reflection for the scholarship of workplace relationships on the conceptual focus and practical relevance of the potentially concerning theories and constructs.

The contribution of this chapter is threefold. First, it is the first empirical study looking into the implicit employment relationship from the participant's perspective in the Chinese context. On this point, it highlights the likelihood that the implicit employment terms in the Chinese context may be below the basic contract and may not be in line with the existing theory. Following on from this, the findings of this chapter shed the first light on the work life of Chinese workers from the psychological contract perspective. In this light, it has revealed some unfamiliar employment experiences and provided convincing evidence and a helpful background for future in-depth and more grounded research. Finally, it offers some heuristic but significant evidence in regard to the theoretical gaps of the literature, suggesting that certain critical boundary condition(s) might have been overlooked by the research. Chapter 8 integrates the findings and discussions of this study (chapters 4, 5, 6 & 7) in light of the overall research aim, reflects on various issues revealed in/by this study and its results and concludes this thesis.

Chapter 8 Integration, Reflection and Conclusion

Given its foundation at the height of liberal thinking regarding free choice, the United States is a likely locale for the concept of a psychological contract to emerge....However, some distinctively American characteristics should also be considered before generalizing research conducted in an American context to another society.

Rousseau (2000a, p274)

The major contribution of this thesis is the identification of two mismatches between theory and research of the psychological contract, especially in an international context. Essentially, this thesis provides direct evidence for Rousseau's (2000a) concerns regarding 'many core assumptions of psychological contract theory (that) are at home in American culture and law' (p274). The first section of this chapter integrates the findings presented in chapters 5, 6 and 7 and discusses issues of generalisability. At its core, the discussions of the present research findings suggest that prior research needs to be reassessed regarding its appropriateness to inform the theory. Section 8.2 integrates findings presented in chapters 4, 5 and 6 in reflecting on the operationalisations of the theory. Since detailed discussions were already included in the respective chapters, and as the unexpected findings led the researcher to more in-depth introspections on the existing literature, this chapter offers reflective discussions of the findings and literature, albeit some reflections on prior research only came as hindsight. The final section concludes this thesis; the key findings and contributions are summarised in Appendix C.

8.1 Generalisability of the Psychological Contract

Rousseau (2000a) lists five key assumptions rooted in the American culture and law that underpin the emergence of the concept of psychological contract. Each of them relates to complex interplays of individual, organisational and socio-cultural forces/systems (e.g., see Rousseau, 1995; 2000a) and thus is profound in its own right. Since it is beyond the current scope to discuss these issues in-depth, it is important to note that the intended focuses of the following discussions are not to be remiss to other potentially important factors. Rousseau and Schalk (2000) provide some comprehensive analyses of psychological contracts across societies; the below assumptions regarding the generalisability of the psychological contract proposed by Rousseau (2000a) will be discussed primarily in light of the findings of this thesis:

- *Individuals are autonomous entities who exercise free choice*
- *Only a willing individual can enter into a binding agreement*
- *Mutuality in understanding is possible between parties in an exchange agreement*
- *Promise keeping can take a variety of forms, which depend on situational factors such as controllability*
- *Parties to a contract are relatively equal, making possible the negotiation of terms in each's own interest (p274).*

The first two assumptions above were not directly explored in this study, but may be

implied in its findings, particularly in regard to culture. The first assumption that Americans are to a great extent autonomous entities who exercise free choice is underpinned by its individualist culture that tolerates a great deal of nonconformity (Rousseau, 2000a). In contrast, the Chinese culture is more collectivist emphasising conformity. A particularly striking cultural element revealed by the findings is the high power distance (Hofstede, 2010; Dorfman et al., 2012), or the Confucian value of hierarchy (Hui, Lee & Rousseau, 2004): such cultural influences were salient across the diversified samples, even among the participants who had overseas experiences and/or foreign co-workers. The conforming Confucian culture had effects on the participants' degrees of free will and is expected to impact on that of the general Chinese workers. Nevertheless, the findings of this thesis do indicate some level of free choice in the Chinese employment context, most saliently reflected in the autonomy in making promises at work (see Chapter 5).

The second assumption regarding the American workers' tendency to volunteer to enter into a binding agreement is more difficult to analyse. While Rousseau (1995) explains in detail the '*loss of voluntariness*' of American workers during the employment transition (pp214-215, original emphasis), she argues that post-transition psychological contracts among American workers are still probable for some emerging trends in new contracting. For the present purpose, let us assume that the argued-for 'several features that continue to promote contracting despite a turbulent environment' are valid and global (for details, see Rousseau, 1995; pp216-218). Yet,

given the rapid major changes of the Chinese labour laws in its short history of 20 years (see Chapter 1), it is reasonable to assume that the Chinese employment is still *in transition*. This is significant regardless of whether the afore-mentioned trends may apply in China because:

In times of transition, there may be conflicts between prevailing and emerging social contracts...(O)rganizations (are) less able to specify performance terms required of employees and...both parties (are) less willing to make commitments. (Rousseau, 1995; pp211-212).

Arguably, structural transitions inevitably create uncertainties in the Chinese employment context in the present era, which make the formal rules (e.g., legal regulations) less dependable/reliable, or at least perceived to be so (see Chapter 7). Accordingly, the findings of Chapter 7 suggest that the participants in general showed similar attitudes to their during-transition American counterparts, i.e., ‘No employee volunteered to be part of the deal’ (Rousseau, 2000a; p215).

The assumptions about mutuality and relative equality between parties in America, as suggested by findings of Chapter 7, may not be generalisable to the Chinese context. Although some workers, especially in the capitalist employment settings, showed the awareness of some zones of negotiability of employment terms, all the workers indicated considerable power gaps in the employment relationship. Although it seems

reasonable to assume that some of the Chinese employment settings should present comparable conditions to create relatively equal parties, it is unlikely that such conditions would widely apply in China, especially in light of its ongoing structural transitions and the weaker labour rights protections (Chapter 7). Considering the inequality of power, the high power distance, a general lack of communication between employment parties and the finding that destructive leader behaviours were prevalently reported by the participants (Chapter 7), mutuality between employment parties may be commonly low in China. In principle, this thesis supports Rousseau's (2000a) warning that 'the principle of mutuality can be problematic in other cultures' (p274).

On the final assumption that 'Americans tend to tolerate uncertainty and appear willing to accept promise keeping that is often less than the specific terms agreed to, as long as a good-faith effort was made and a good relationship exists between the parties' (Rousseau, 2000a, p274), the findings of Chapter 5 are quite convincing that the Chinese workers had higher expectations for promise-keeping¹⁷. Nevertheless, there was no evidence to indicate that the Chinese workers had zero tolerance of uncertainty in promise-related behaviours. The lower levels of uncertainty tolerance in the Chinese culture and the high expectations related to promise-keeping arguably reduces the desired flexibility of promise-based contracts, but this does not overturn the applicability of promise in the Chinese employment. In fact, the Chinese workers

¹⁷ Note that this finding is particularly pertinent to the promises made by the participants, whereas there were common expectations of promise-breaking behaviours by employers.

interpreted employment promises to cover a wider scope of exchanges beyond the basic contract, which suggests that promise-based contracts are probably applicable in China.

In conclusion, all of the above assumptions are arguably, and to varied degrees, applicable in China, although it needs to be clearly stressed that this does not necessarily indicate generalisability of the psychological contract. In explaining this, there are two subtle but important distinctions that need to be clarified: the applicability of a concept does not necessarily imply the generalisability of its theory/theories; the applicability of a theory does not necessarily imply the generalisability of its empirical phenomena. Herein lies important implications of the psychological contract as a concept, a theory and/or a construct (also see Guest, 1998). As a concept, the psychological contract is understandably versatile, indicating an almost common-sense notion that there exist implicit binding expectations between parties of a contract (Argyris, 1960). From this perspective, the concept is applicable to a wide range of research topics and across-societal contexts, even after Rousseau (1989) reconceptualised it according to the central notion of promise-based reciprocity (Rousseau, 1998). As a theory of the concept, Rousseau (1995; 2001) develops the psychological contract as a schema that is built on the relied-upon employment promises; while this theory is arguably still applicable in a wide range of contexts, its generalisability is restricted by some basic assumptions, such as those discussed above. Because the degrees of applicability of such assumptions may vary

across contexts, the theory's generalisability to the represented/hypothesised reality – or the empirical observation, assuming appropriately measured – may vary accordingly. These discussions suggest – in accordance with the opening quote – to assume the generalisability of the psychological contract across societies is problematic.

Furthermore, it is worthy of a caveat against the assumption that there is an unproblematic generalisability of the theory within a single society, even in America. From the empirical perspective, the fact that there have been 'old' and 'new' psychological contracts (see Rousseau, 1995) indicates that they are not static phenomena. From the theoretical perspective, Chapter 7 suggests that existing theory might not be as useful in explaining some empirical observations of, or similar to, psychological contracts that were formed under imbalanced power relations. On this issue, it needs to be pointed out that the existing literature regarding the power relations in the American context is ambiguous and confusing. For example, Rousseau (1995) shows her optimism about the American workers' level of voluntariness, especially in relation to the development in the workforce:

Higher education levels, especially the increased professionalization of the workforce, create individuals who themselves initiate contract making... Graen and Scandura (1987) demonstrate that managers supervise highly skilled and well-motivated workers differently than their less able counterparts, an

indicator that active individual contract making is at work among the highly qualified segment of the workforce (p216).

An immediate question regarding the above would be: how about the 'less able counterparts' in America? Would they have psychological contracts? If they did, would their psychological contracts necessarily be underpinned, and explained, by the same theory as their 'highly skilled' colleagues? In other words, is the existing theory necessarily generalisable between the two groups of workers? These issues are particularly worrying because Rousseau (2000a; p261) implies that the difference in bargaining powers among American workers may be huge:

A comparatively small segment of American workers have formal written contracts. Those with written contracts include workers covered by collective bargaining agreements and elite workers in high-demand professions ("super-stars") who are able to demand formal binding agreements (e.g., executives, professional athletes) (Frank & Cook, 1995). Most workers are party to implied contracts that are oral or otherwise informally expressed commitments between themselves and the firm.

The power distance between 'super-stars' and the 'less capable' American workers may be significant, because the power gap between the two groups of workers seems to relate to both formal protections (e.g., written contracts) and informal arrangements

(e.g., differential supervisory treatments). Although Rousseau (2000a) attempted to justify that – despite these circumstances – the majority of American workers still have considerable powers and thus ‘it appears that many aspects of these informal agreements are honoured to the reasonable satisfaction of both parties (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994)’ (p261), this argument is not convincing and is barely acceptable for at least three reasons. First, the samples of the cited study were ‘the 1987 alumni of an MBA program in a midwestern U.S. management school’ whose ‘starting salaries, in 1987, ranged from \$24,000 to \$90,000 with a median of \$43,500’ (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; pp249-250). It is at best puzzling that how such samples could be representative or even indicative for the majority of American workers, not the least because their lowest starting salaries were almost equal to the American median *household* income in 1987, i.e., \$26,061 (The U.S. Census Bureau, 2015) and their occupations seem to make it rather unlikely that they did not have formal contracts (see Robinson & Rousseau, 1994, pp249-250). For the sake of argument, even assuming that these samples were representative and their employment agreements were largely unwritten, the cited study would still be unlikely to support the argument that ‘these informal agreements are honoured to the reasonable satisfaction of both parties’; most obviously because the article is titled ‘Violating the psychological contract: not the exception but the norm’ (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; p245). The first paragraph under the result section of the article is as follows:

A majority of respondents (54.8 per cent), reported that their employer had, at

some time, violated their psychological contract. The continuous measure of violation yielded a mean response score of 2.62 with a standard deviation of 1.08, indicating that the average employee reported some failure in contract fulfilment (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; p252).

Finally, it is baffling how the above study could infer the satisfaction of ‘both parties’, since the authors only studied the employee’s perceptions (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Ironically, the cited study appears to argue against what Rousseau (2000a) intended to argue for: Robinson and Rousseau’s (1994) empirical results indeed suggest that even the ‘super-stars’ in America suffered from poorly kept psychological contracts. These discussions cast serious doubts on the levels of generalisability of the psychological contract even in America, never mind in less developed countries.

At an international level, the generalisability of the theory becomes more difficult to discuss. For example, while the assumptions of the psychological contract may be sufficiently applicable in some employment contexts in China, a hard-to-refute, and critical, incomparability of societal values is inherent in the fact that China is essentially a socialist country: despite the Chinese political-economic transformation/reform, the socialist guiding principle of justice/morality, at its core, is *equality in outcome* in contrast to that of the market/capitalist, i.e., *equality in opportunity* (also see Rousseau 1995; 2000a). This difference at the core of justice stance could be crucial as the findings of this thesis suggest that moral issues may be

theoretically fundamental for the psychological contract (Chapter 5). The below examples from Ken and Lisa who worked at state-held public companies (Fortune Top 50; 2015) may be illustrative of the fundamental socialist justice ideology, at least at structural levels. The following interview excerpts relate to discussions on the perceptions of employment terms, whereby Ken and Lisa talked about their experiences to explain the perceived insignificance of employment obligations and promises (less informative parts are abridged):

Ken: ...my performances are the best and my salaries are the highest – the leader has an issue about it. He said other colleagues felt jealous and my salaries should be reduced. From the original 100% commission, to 80% and now 70%...

Researcher: What do you mean by the 100%, 80% and 70%?

Ken: For example, the policy says ‘100 Yuan commission per transaction of sales’, so initially I got the 100 Yuan per sale. Later the leader said: ‘no, your salary is too high’ and took 20% of it to give to other colleagues, leaving 80 Yuan per transaction for me. Then again he changed his mind and took another 10% of my commission to give to others, leaving 70% for me. Recently, he wanted to take another 20% to give to someone in the team....

Researcher: *Why didn't you fight to keep your 100% commission?*

Ken: **【shaking his head helplessly in silence】**

Researcher: *You couldn't get it?*

Ken: *Could I, Possibly? I tried. It didn't work. The leader disapproved.*

Researcher: *But do you think this is justified?*

Ken: *'Justified'? It's never been the issue of 'just' or 'unjust'; there's only 'adaptation'. When I can't change the environment, all I can do is to first adapt myself to it. Understand? That's why talking about the so-called 'obligation' and what you called 'promise' is nothing but just bul**hit! 【contemptuous tone and increased voice】*

The above case is especially interesting because, as the top achiever, Ken had significant bargaining powers and did negotiate with the leader to have rejected the latest demand for commission sharing; he even threatened to quit to have successfully refused a leader's request to work on weekends. Nevertheless, there were incidents where it was believed to be impossible that he could reject certain implicit or informal terms, such as the reduction of commissions, mandatory sharing of his year-end bonuses with colleagues, informal/illegal practices regarding sick/annual leaves and certain informal salary deductions at the leader's discretion. Ken's experiences seemed also consistent with Lisa's account:

For example, I could get a million Yuan bonus..., but this exceeded what my boss got...so he changed the bonus rules and cut half of my bonus...

Lisa also explained that the *'annual leaves were refused and many people did not take annual leaves. The national regulation says that there must be compensation (for the ungiven annual leaves)...but no, there was not a penny'*. The participants' negative sentiments about the notions of obligations and promises, and resigned acceptance of contract breach resulting from the authority structures and high power-distance cultures seem commonplace (also see sections 7.1, 7.2 & 7.3). The fact that many participants of this research struggled to answer the interview questions (see sections 4.1 & 4.2, 5.4.2) is striking. Not only do these clearly suggest the lack of resonance of the psychological contract and its constructs (such as breach and violation) in the Chinese context, but also appear highly in line with Dick and Nadin's (2011) observations of psychological contracts in small and medium enterprises in the UK, supporting their critics of the psychological contract's discursive powers in justifying the exploitation of workers. On this point, it would be quite interesting to compare Lisa's account and Rousseau's speculation of annual leaves in the American context:

What it has become now is this: if you can apply for annual leaves, it means your work quota is not sufficient; your work volume is not enough – that's why you can think about taking leaves. OK, either your job is merged with others' or there must be an increase to your work volume.

In the words of one human resource manager trying to reconcile the vacation benefits of his U.S. workers (who typically receive 2 to 3 weeks' vacation but take less than half of it) and his expatriated German workers (who typically receive at least 5 weeks of vacation and tend to take much of it all at once), 'If you can be gone a month, you can be gone forever'. The German-style vacation system is not likely to be adopted widely in the United States anytime soon.

Rousseau (2000a, p273)

The above appear rather similar. One on hand, the discussions so far beg the question of to what extent the relative power of the *majority* of American workers really differs from their Chinese counterparts'? On the other hand, there appears to be significant differences in some principle management/employment rationalities between the American and Chinese employment contexts. The issue of generalisability of the psychological contract across societal-cultures (see Chapter 5) is more complex than suggested by the existing literature. Future grounded research in this light is needed.

The preceding discussions lead to two conclusions. First, while the concept of psychological contract is likely to be *applicable* in China, its *generalisability* to most Chinese workers seems unlikely. Second, there is a need to re-evaluate the

generalisability of the psychological contract in the western context; this means to say that there is a significant risk to assume *all* western workers have psychological contracts *based on the assumed relatively equal power* in their employment relationship. When the imbalance in power is so great, or for other reasons such as irreconcilable conflicts, that promise-based negotiations become impossible, it is unlikely that the existing theory can be generalisable or even applicable for the implicit binding agreements between such parties. Albeit there may be an implicit norm in management research of not focusing on the less privileged workers, this norm is difficult for the psychological contract because one of Rousseau's (2000a) justifications for the theory's usefulness is that the majority of (American) workers are *not* 'elite' professionals and thus rely on the informal employment arrangements.

There is perhaps a rebuttal of the above conclusion regarding the challenged generalisability of the psychological contract across different segments of workers in the western context, in that the generalisability appears to be supported by the large number of existing empirical studies across employment settings. Putting aside the inconsistent findings of the research, my fundamental counter-argument is that *the existing empirical research is not appropriately underpinned by appropriate psychological contract theory*. A more straightforward perspective to explain this would be that the existing research instruments for the psychological contract construct are not rigorously in accordance with the theoretical assumptions outlined by, e.g., Rousseau (1995; 2000a). Before taking up this perspective in more detail in

the next section, it may be important to clarify that, in a similar light, Rousseau's (1998) rebuttal of Guest's (1998) critique was logically undermined because her fundamental arguments seemed to base on statistical correlations of empirical results: there is a logical flaw to argue for a theoretical construct based on empirical observations rather than theoretical foundations, never mind that the empirical evidence was neither conclusive nor consistent, and at that time was contextually limited. This is because "while it might be appropriate, statistically speaking, to say that one observation 'explains' another observation, this is not, theoretically speaking, an explanation" (Whetten, 2009, p33). No empirical research was found to have explicitly discussed, for example, the boundary conditions of promise in relation to the study; meaning that, taking the predominant quantitative approaches for example, the hypotheses were found to be essentially based on the previous empirical results than the theory¹⁸. Historically, this may relate to the facts that Rousseau's (1989) seminal work is essentially *a reconceptualisation* of the psychological contract *but not a theorisation*; and thus unsurprisingly, the first empirical attempt to *construct the concept* did not seem to be informed by adequate theoretical foundations (Rousseau, 1990) which only came in light much later (Rousseau, 1995; 2001). As a result, Rousseau's (1990) first empirical study claiming to validity the psychological contract was misguided in the sampling in a similar way to Robinson and Rousseau (1994), as well as in operationalising the concept/construct by using the undefined and unelaborated term 'obligation' (see Chapter 2). The eager claims of the construct

¹⁸ This refers to the elements directly relating to the psychological contract theory, but not that may involve other theoretical perspectives. Also see the immediately following.

validity and phenomena of psychological contracts in employment (Rousseau, 1990) did in fact stimulate some immediate scholarly attention (see Rousseau, 1998); unfortunately, the premature conclusions also led to Rousseau's (1995) later theoretical specifications of promise being completely neglected in the empirical research, rather ironically, even by herself (e.g., Hui, Lee & Rousseau, 2004; Wade-Benzoni, Rousseau & Li, 2006). This is risky not only because the later studies seemed to rather test the previous empirical results over the theory, but also because they depend heavily on the instrument validity which will be argued to be not unproblematic in the following section.

8.2 Operationalising the Psychological Contract

This section provides an integration of the findings relate to the notions of obligation (Chapter 4), promise (Chapter 5) and the other party (Chapter 6); these have been discussed in relation to the operational issues of the psychological contract in the respective chapters (for a critical review of the measurement reliability, see Freese and Schalk, 2008). The below briefly discuss the related issues regarding psychological contract research and research methodologies.

To begin with, the findings of this thesis suggest that the debate over the terms of obligation and promise, and also expectation by implication, should probably be not on which engenders more psychological engagements (e.g., Roehling, 2008) but rather how the theory could be better reflected. The existing scholarly attention has

been to a great extent misled into focusing on the issue of results/statistical significance, overshadowing the critical issue of research validity. At issue is that, even considering the earlier research, there have been scarce grounded studies of the psychological contract, perhaps except for Argyris (1960) who conceived the heuristic but embryonic idea over half a century ago. Rousseau's (1989) seminal work, however insightful it may be, does not seem to make the psychological contract an adequate theory based on which quantitative studies could be appropriately informed. Despite Rousseau (2001) making a fairly good attempt to theorise the concept, this post-theorising after the establishment of the predominant quantitative studies mostly based on her earlier work (Rousseau, 1989) does not seem to have sufficiently redirected the research (see chapters 2, 3 & 5). From a conceptual perspective, there has been a fundamental shift in focus of the psychological contract, since the original:

...framework (i.e., the psychological contract)...eschews any direct link to legal practice, but rather builds on such legal concepts as relational contracts (MacNeil, 1985) to provide insight to issues surrounding implied and psychological contracts in applied behavioural research (Rousseau, 1989; p124).

Although the concept of contract was still salient in the later work to augment the notion of promise (Rousseau, 1995), it has been to a great extent subsided in and after Rousseau (2001) that is fundamentally built on the concept of schema. Unfortunately,

the theoretical/conceptual support Rousseau (1989; 1995; 2001) draws from to underpin the psychological contract, arguably all have their own unsettled arguments, differences and/or critics spanning over several decades, e.g., the relational contract (cf., McNeil, 1985), social exchange theory (cf., Emerson, 1976), schema (cf., Stein, 1992) and, perhaps to a lesser extent, promise (cf., Bankins, 2010). Although this does not necessarily weaken the theoretical underpinning of the psychological contract, it does seem to undermine the theory because – without adequately justifying the adopted position(s) among the various conceptual/theoretical approaches – it is difficult to address the related issues/critics accordingly. Although Rousseau (2011) admits that ‘promises and mutual obligations in employment...differ in ways that can impact both the ease and appropriateness of contract measurement across cultures and the effects observed’ (p208), the findings of chapters 4, 5 and 6 strongly suggest that the underlying issue of the research has as much to do with its operational accuracy as its theoretical clarity. At least, the discussions included in Chapter 7 suggest that, without adequate clarifications on the threshold role of power in the theory, it seems rather challenging to operationalise the psychological contract, not knowing who would be the appropriate sample to study the phenomena.

Closely related to the above is an issue of tautology. Since the existing empirical studies did not appear to have appropriately informed sample inclusion/exclusion criteria¹⁹, the implicit logic seems to be: since the empirical results appeared

¹⁹ For an exception, see Cassar and Briner (2009), although their inclusion criterion seems rather vague and thus should not undermine the argument here, i.e., it is based on the participant’s

statistically valid, the participants must have had psychological contracts. First of all, there needs to be a theoretical justification to argue for the validity of the sample before considering the results. Secondly, the logic would appear rather tautological: the participants are assumed to have psychological contracts and the assumption seems to be implicitly supported by the fact that the participants were examined by psychological contract measures. In addition, since the existing measures include some very basic employment exchanges in the transactional dimension of psychological contracts (e.g., see Rousseau, 2000b), or the even more rudimentary transitional dimension (see Rousseau, 1995), it begs the question of what type of employment beliefs would be classified as non-psychological contracts. Simply put, in what scenario, e.g., for the quantitative studies, would the participants be claimed to have no psychological contracts, especially when the normative practice in the field appeared to be that of dropping 'insignificant items' when statistics did not work out as expected (e.g., Hui, Lee & Rousseau, 2004)? The implication of these issues is so grave that even when O'Leary-Kelly et al. (2014) found 28 percent of their participants had similar accounts to that of the participants of this study, the authors labelled the findings as a developmental stage of psychological contracts:

Examination of these atypical cases suggested a contract characterized by virtually no expectations beyond the basic promise of employment (some level of pay for some level of work). Given their nascent nature, we adopt the term

agreement on the statement of 'Employers and employees have particular employment obligations toward each other'.

underdeveloped contract as a fitting label.

Given that the samples included in the above study had had on average 40 months working experiences in the concerned work context, all of whom had at least a bachelor's degree, it seems curious that why more than a quarter of the participants still had nascent or underdeveloped psychological contracts; or rather, could it still be explained by the psychological contract, really? In this light, it should be highlighted that there seems to be a recent theoretical development regarding the dissolution of psychological contracts (Tomprou et al., 2015), although the model does not seem to provide an answer to the above questions, at least at an operational level.

To clarify, the findings and discussions of this thesis should not be taken as being remiss to the contributions of the psychological contract and/or its research. In particular, the psychological contract has been a very useful concept to help explain and make sense of employment incidents, beliefs and experiences (e.g., Blenkinsopp & Zdunczyk, 2005). The issues in question seem to only surface when the concept is used as a theory for predictions or to establish statistical correlations; awkwardly, the majority of the empirical research does seem to fall under this category. This leads to some reflections on the research methodologies of the psychological contract. First, in light of 'our currently limited understanding of the PC development process' (O'Leary, et al., 2014), qualitative approaches are arguably more suitable or even necessary to study psychological contract phenomena before a more established theory/ies could

be grounded (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). This is especially so as schema is suggested to underpin the theory, for that Sherman and Morley (2015) recently argue:

As previously explained, a schema is idiosyncratic, highly unique, and is the product of past experience. With this in mind, it is unlikely that the survey approach will elicit the particularities of each individual's experience, instead outlining dimensions that only loosely reflect this experience. Therefore, adopting different measurement techniques is necessary to tap into the nuances of the individual's psychological contract story (p179).

Given that schemas can be difficult to access because they may not be entirely conscious to individuals (Rousseau, 2001), the authors also issue a warning to the qualitative researchers regarding potential difficulties to access the relevant information from the participants (Sherman & Morley, 2015). This warning is pertinent, since some researchers, to varying degrees, had experiences that the participants found the concerned concepts abstract or had little to say about the interview questions (e.g., Cassar & Briner, 2009; Dick & Nadin, 2011; also see O'Leary, et al., 2014):

As outlined above, in some of the firms, some participants...found it difficult to answer the interview questions. It seemed that the ideas communicated through the questions lacked relevance and meaning for them. This is a field note

recorded by the second author...: I had to be very flexible in terms of the questions I asked, trying all different ways to phrase questions to generate a response...I had to drag information out.... On the whole, I felt they wondered what on earth I was going on about! (Dick & Nadin, 2011; p300).

On this point, the above quote largely reflects the fieldwork experiences of this study, wherein many participants, especially the less educated, felt it difficult to get around the ideas communicated in the interview questions. Partially in dealing with this issue, the strategy adopted in the second half of the interview seemed helpful in this study (see Chapter 3), especially in light of the issues discussed in Chapter 4. In general, the strategy involved encouraging the participants to first talk about their own workplace/career experiences as a background in understanding their general employment perceptions, and then asking them directly the relevant interview questions when an appropriate opportunity arose. However, this strategy may require a relatively skilled interviewer to recognise the right timing for questioning, carry on the interview with the participant's comfort zone of conversation and use indirect questioning techniques when the participants had sustained difficulties in answering interview questions. Overall, Sherman and Morley's (2015) advice on carefully selecting qualitative research methods in studying the psychological contract is worthy of serious considerations.

At a more fundamental level, it should be pointed out that Rousseau's recent

theoretical model (Tomprou et al., 2015) is based on the literature of social cognition (e.g., Bandura, 2001): as Bandura (1996) criticises ‘the scientific legitimacy of theories confined to correlations of observables and those that specify the mechanisms governing the relations between observable events’ (p323), it would be interesting to discuss about the metaphysical issues of the psychological contract, in particular when the existing research philosophies are mostly implied and may not be justified. Philosophically, critical realism (see Archer, et al., 2013) seems to be an intuitive fit for the psychological contract for its ontological reductionist²⁰ but epistemological non-reductionist views that appear similar with Bandura’s (1989; p1181; 1996). Methodologically, in part due to a harmony in philosophical positions between Kelly’s (1955) personal construct psychology and Bandura’s (2001) social cognitive theory (see McWilliams, 2008), the personal construct psychology/repertory grid technique has been recently promoted as a useful research method for its ‘capacity to provide in-depth insight into personal experience’ (Burr, King & Butt, 2014, p341), especially for the psychological contract:

...we suggest that the repertory grid technique may be an alternative way of eliciting the content dimensions...; its big advantage over other methodologies is that the data elicited are idiosyncratic and largely unbiased (Sherman & Morley, 2015; p181).

²⁰ It should be clarified that Bandura (1996) also holds an ontological nondeterministic view and there can be different interpretations of his philosophical positions (e.g., Rottschaefer, 1991).

Overall, I concur with the above authors in that understanding psychological contracts as idiosyncratic is theoretically appropriate but practically difficult (although it does not refute the existence of an empirical phenomenon, by the possibility that we may not be able to, at the moment of time, scientifically explain, predict or objectively measure it). Nevertheless, the findings and discussions of this thesis suggest that the operational issues of the psychological contract seem to be far beyond construct validity/reliability, but primarily relate to more fundamental issues of philosophical (re)positioning, methodological reconsiderations and theoretical rethinking. Since most of the significant reflections and implications of this research have been included in the discussions of this chapter and the previous chapters of findings and analyses, the next section concludes this thesis by offering some final remarks.

8.5 Concluding Remarks

This study set out to study psychological contracts in China. The overarching aim of this thesis was to explore Chinese workers' own accounts of implicit deals at work. To achieve this aim, four research questions were formulated and answered, regarding workers' understanding of obligation, promise and the other party in the Chinese employment context, as well as the implicit employment terms by the Chinese workers. The findings, discussions, implications and contributions of these research questions have been organised into four chapters, respectively (chapters 4, 5, 6 & 7; see Appendix C). This section provides some final remarks to this thesis.

8.5.1 Implications and Future Research

While there have been many issues regarding the theory and its literature discussed in this thesis that deserve more scholarly attention, several key points have major implications for future research. First and foremost, future quantitative studies, or qualitative studies using the psychological contract as a theory, should take precautions in their research designs. The psychological contract theory/theories, in its current form, seems unlikely to provide scientifically solid or sufficiently specific theoretical grounds for the theory-dependent research. While qualitative approaches are urgently called for (e.g., Rousseau, 2011; Sherman & Morley, 2015), a particular note for the quantitative scholars is that there is a risk, in a logical nature, in *justifying* the adaptation of a measure by citing the previous studies wherein the measure was claimed to be successfully used (see Section 5.3). In this light, future research may be prioritised to look into some theoretical directions in improving the theory. Related to this, morality and power are promising directions for the theoretical developments of the psychological contract. On a secondary level relating to morality and power, individual differences, emotion/coping, power-dependence and social learning may be also worth pursuing. Another direction is to explore psychological contracts in different societal contexts by more grounded approaches. Also, discussions should be primarily and directly focused on the theoretical relations between context, theory and phenomena (see Tsui, 2012). Precautions should also be taken on linguistic implications, if applicable. Similarly, lexical meanings of operational terms may be worth consulting in addition to the theoretical discussions/assumptions before

conducting the empirical research. Finally, the Chinese employment context is particularly worth researching for management and organisational behaviours scholars, albeit future studies should take into account of the potential impact of its dual employment system, as well as its highly diversified employment practices. More specifically, future studies into the roles of leaders, and what supervisor-employee relationships signify, in the Chinese context seem promising. Given that its unique employment context has been little considered in the existing management research, in general and for now, qualitative/grounded studies may be more appropriate in China; particularly in light of the increasing attention on the connecting of eastern and western perspectives on management²¹ (cf., Huang & Bond, 2012). Before turning to the next subsection, it is important to clarify that – despite the critical stance of this thesis – there is no principal argument against quantitative methodologies *per se* (see Sherman & Morley, 2015). In this regard, the concerning researchers would benefit from using appropriate counter-measures against likely or even probable errors/biases, such as same-source bias and common method variance (CMV). This is especially pertinent for psychological contract research as several constructs/measures used in a single study are mostly filled up by the same participant; the commonly used constructs, such as trust and satisfaction, are very likely to share CMV with their antecedents (cf. Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). Lastly, there is perhaps a necessary introspection, at least from a moral perspective, for scholars on a difficult issue regarding professional operatives and practical/career considerations.

²¹ See <http://aomlists.pace.edu/scripts/wa.exe?A2=ob;8f2d5ff8.1506>

8.5.2 A Few Words for Managers in China

This study was originally motivated by practical management issues in China (Section 1.1). Although the findings of this research arguably have more implications for researchers than practitioners, there may be several useful notes for managers in China to observe. First, there is a moral obligation for the leaders in China to protect their workers as fairly as possible, especially in light of the perceived undependable formal protections of labour rights. Second, the managers should be proactive in communicating with their workers, and encourage the workers to communicate with them, in order to enhance mutuality in understanding and reducing the high power distance cultural barrier. The managers in China should know – and I suspect that they do – that poor communication and perceived uncontrollable injustice commonly result in poor job satisfactions which in turn may create various undesirable workplace behaviours and organisational issues. Despite the particularly powerful positions of managers in the Chinese context and the fact that the Chinese workers have comparatively less freedom to choose, there is an expected tendency in organisations to lose the most qualified/productive workers – who are usually more employable and thus have more choices – when the leadership is destructive. For many reasons, managers in the Chinese employment context play more critical roles than their counterparts in the west. It is a particularly meaningful and pertinent issue for managers in China to introspect on their roles as organisational agents and as the (hoped-for) voice and soundboard of their workers.

8.5.3 A Final Note

It is difficult to hold on an open mind over an extended time – and yet, that is what is required of the scientist.

– Mary Ainsworth (1967, p457)

The world has been changing increasingly fast; doing research in a fast changing era particularly requires an open mind to constantly challenge established assumptions and wisdoms, irrespective of how convincing the existing evidence may appear to be. I would like the reader, and myself, to be reminded that developments in China have been so rapid that its compressed development model is argued to signal ‘something unprecedented in human history’ (Whittaker et al., 2010; p440). While this thesis has made a fair contribution to our understanding of the psychological contract, it is my foremost hope that the revealed, perhaps rather devastating, employment contexts in China will improve very quickly. It is also my personal, but firm, belief that China has been progressively developing toward a better future. On this note, I would like to close my thesis regarding the psychological contract in the Chinese employment context.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Additional Ethnographical Approaches (Observations)

No.	Nature and Purpose	Settings/Contexts	Duration
1	Covert – to observe natural working contexts and behaviours	Public settings where the participant work	15 minutes
2	Covert – to observe natural working contexts and behaviours	Public settings where the participants work	45 minutes
3	Overt – to observe natural working contexts and behaviours <i>after work</i>	Public settings where participants “close-off” daily work; Non-intrusive observation.	40 minutes
4	Overt – to observe natural	Non-intrusive observation at	Several days

	working contexts and behaviours	workplace	(non-consecutive)
5	Overt – natural working contexts and behaviours	Non-intrusive observation at workplace	Several days (non-consecutive)
6	Overt – to observe natural working contexts	Non-intrusive observation at workplace*	15 minutes
7	Covert – to observe participants' interactions at non-workplace settings	Public settings where participants interact after work	2 hours
8	Overt – to observe participants' daily life contexts and culture (Xiamen)	Non-intrusive observation at non-workplace settings	2 consecutive days
9	Overt – to observe participants' daily life contexts and culture (Fushun)	Non-intrusive observation at non-workplace settings	2 consecutive days
10	Covert – to observe socio-cultural contexts of research sites (Xiamen & Fushun)	Non-intrusive observations at public settings	Throughout the fieldwork
11	Covert – to survey the general work context and employment contract conditions in SMEs	Short queries/surveys ** and non-intrusive observations at public settings	12 Surveys in four days; each lasted for several minutes; 10-65 minutes observations.

* Conducted on a weekend when only a minimum number of on-call staff were present. Access was orally granted by the manager on duty.

** Queries were carried out along main streets of research sites in shops with clear recruiting advertisements around their premises. Besides date, time, location, industry and size of the shops surveyed, records include legal contract conditions and benefits, working hours and off days, and entry and exit procedures.

Appendix A (Continued): Additional Ethnographical Approaches

(Informant Interviews)

No.	Informants	Content	Duration/Remarks
1	A manager with 35 years working experiences in a national bank	Work contexts of banking industry	3 hours Recorded by notes
2	Two consultants with over 15 years in the management consultancy industry	Overall employment relationships in China	1.5 hours Recorded by notes
3	A manager with 5 years experiences in a labour agency	Overall employment conditions in Xiamen and wider contexts	15 minutes Audio-recorded; 95 minutes Recorded by notes
4	A supervisor with 5 years	Work contexts of the	1.5 hours

	experiences in a MNC	IT/service industry	Recorded by notes
5	A supervisor with 18 years in a national bureau	Work contexts of government institutions	3.5 hours Recorded by notes
6	An employee with 26 years experiences in a local government	Work contexts of the government	1 hour Recorded by notes
7	An employee with 18 years experiences in a state-owned energy company	Work contexts of state-owned companies	3 hours Recorded by notes
8	An employee with 18 years in the informal employment, i.e., no employment contracts	Work contexts in the informal employment	30 minutes Recorded by notes
9	A supervisor with 12 years experiences in a public hospital	Work contexts in public institutions	1 hour Recorded by notes
10	An employee with 6 years experiences in a commercial bank in Beijing	Work contexts in Beijing	29 minutes Audio-recorded
11	A manager with 9 years experiences in a private-owned hotel Beijing	Work contexts in Beijing	20 minutes Recorded by notes

Appendix B: Sample Consent Form (in Chinese)



英国赫尔大学商学院
同意书

研究课题：当不平等被‘承诺’，心理契约会怎样？

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博士生导师：Steve Armstrong 教授 (s.j.armstrong@hull.ac.uk)

John Blenkinsopp 教授 (J.Blenkinsopp@hull.ac.uk)

我同意：

- 我理解本研究课题的目的并给予机会提问相关问题。
- 我理解我所提供的信息都将会被严格保密，并且我个人及我所提及的所有人的身份信息在任何时候都将被做匿名处理。我理解并同意在访谈过程中，谈话将会被录音并形成文档文件。
- 我理解访谈内容将作为研究员为其博士论文所用，并有可能发表在英文学术期刊上。
- 我理解我所提供的任何可能泄露身份的信息都不会被公开。
- 我理解我本着自愿原则参与本次访谈，并可以在任何时间，无需提供任何理由的推出访谈。我理解如果我决定退出访谈，我对该研究课题的参与将会立即停止，并且我所提供的任何信息都不会被任何人使用。
- 如果我对该项研究课题有任何不满，我知道我可以联系该博士研究员的博士导师，或者/并且联系英国赫尔大学商学院商业道德委员会主席 Waymond Rodgers 教授（Chair, School of Business Ethics Committee, University of Hull, HU6 7RX. Email: W.Rodgers@hull.ac.uk. Tel: +4414824633136）

我同意参与该博士课题研究.

参与者签名:..... 日期:.....

姓名:

博士研究员签名: 日期:

姓名: (Moona) 马国鑫

Appendix C: Summary of Key Findings and Contributions

Research Questions	Key Findings	Key Contributions
How do Chinese workers interpret 'obligations' in the employment context? (Chapter 4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The word 'obligation' in Chinese, and likely also in English, is ambiguous in the employment context. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The likelihood of problematic conceptual validity of using obligation to operationalise the theory. - Highlighting the linguistic implications for international research
How do Chinese workers interpret 'promise', especially in the employment context? (Chapter 5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The binding power of promises is mostly moral. - The perceptions of promise are probably influenced by its lexical meanings. - Promises cover a wide scope of employment exchanges. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Morality is likely to be a promising direction for the theoretical development. - The likelihood that the theoretical meaning of promise has not been appropriately reflected in empirical research.
Who is considered 'the other party' of the employment relationship by Chinese workers? (Chapter 6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The employing organisations and immediate superiors are most likely to be considered the other party of the employment relationship. - The workplace relationships, influenced by the highly diversified employment arrangements, are more complex in the dual employment system in China. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Revealing the complexity of dual employment arrangements in China. - Pointing out likely mismatches of the conceptual focus and empirical research in operationalising the theory by adopting different terms of the other party. - Highlighting linguistic implications of related terms in China.
How do Chinese workers describe their perceptions of implicit employment terms? (Chapter 7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Zone of negotiability is affected by employment arrangements. - Societal context is critical, including both structural and cultural elements. - Leaders hold particularly strong powers at work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The perceptions of implicit employment terms may be below the basic contract and might not be in accordance with the existing theory. - Employment experiences in China may be unfamiliar and deserve more grounded research. - Highlighting several potential theoretical gaps in the literature, especially regarding power and context.

This is the end of this document.

Thank you.