

# Sexual Harassment in Irregular Chinese Workplaces: Business Dinners, Team-Building Activities, and Social Media

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*Much of the social and economic inequality that sexual harassment perpetuates is created in the workplace. But research has not always acknowledged the fluid and changing nature of workspaces. This article argues that irregular workspaces and activities—bars and other social drinking sites at which yingchou (business drinking activities) take place, team building, and the WeChat social media platform—are significant sites of sexual harassment in China. These irregular workplaces play a significant role in working life in China, and their informality has made them prone to sexual harassment in the context of deeply entrenched gender norms and vertical power hierarchy.*

## INTRODUCTION

Most of the studies of sexual harassment in the United States and other constitutional regimes focus on workplaces, which is a logical consequence of the fact that much of the social and economic inequality that sexual harassment perpetuates is created in organizational settings (Acker 2006). Workplace sexual harassment continues to be experienced by many women and some men in a variety of organizational settings (Fitzgerald 1993; Berdahl et al. 1996; McDonald 2012). But the workplace is a fluid and changing concept: the landscape of the workplace varies in different national contexts and epochs. For one thing, the configurations of cultural and structural factors comprising social context can shape the content and the boundary of the workplace in different societies. As well, changes that occur over time, especially the increase of digitalization in recent decades, can and have redefined the scope and form of the workplace all over the world. The contextualized and changing workplace concept necessitates an updated understanding of the workplace—where sexual harassment occurs—especially in cross-national workplace sexual harassment research.

This article studies workplace sexual harassment issues in Chinese society. Yet, instead of focusing on conventional workspaces such as offices or factories, I turn my gaze toward a set of more insidious and irregular workspaces: bars and other social drinking sites at which *yingchou* (business drinking activities) take place; the environment in which team-building activities take place; and the WeChat platform,

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on which it is common for colleagues to interact. These irregular workplaces play a significant role in working life in China, and I argue that their informality has made them prone to sexual harassment in the context of deeply entrenched gender norms and vertical power hierarchy. Further, business organizations tend to trivialize, normalize, or even justify harassing acts in such irregular workspaces. Both effective legal regulation and scholarly attention to harassment in these spaces have been absent.

That is where the meaning of this article lies—in revealing the hidden sexual harassment acts in these ignored irregular workspaces, disengaging the tangled roots behind the rampant phenomenon, and calling for more updated and effective legal action against them. I develop this article through analysis of these irregular forms of workspaces and through interviews with workers navigating harassment in these workplace environments. The findings of this research indicate that the less-structured characteristics of these irregular work environments and the absence of legal regulation of interactions in them allow the exacerbation of the harassing behaviors, thus making these atypical work settings not only a hotbed of harassment that Chinese employees cannot escape but also training grounds for more general practices of sexualization and harassment. This article argues that the sexual desire of harassers, in part, accounts for the occurrence of irregular workplace sexual harassing acts. At a deeper level, however, the bullying sexual harassment behaviors revealed in this research are the exercise of organizational power in a vertical hierarchy to consolidate internal oppression and male dominance.

Although grounded in the Chinese workplaces, I believe the implications of this research are not entirely local. Many concerns raised in this article have been shared by other societies of similar cultures or those that have a similar path forward. For example, heavy drinking in office-related social gatherings is not unique to China; cyber harassment is also an international issue; and the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the importance and frequency of online interactions between colleagues (De', Pandey, and Pal 2020; Dwivedi et al. 2020). Irregular workplaces are proliferating in industrialized countries and pose distinct challenges that scholars and policy makers should not ignore.

The first section of this article offers a literature review of theoretical explanations for workplace sexual harassment and of the few existing studies of sexual harassment in informal work settings. The second section then lays a foundation for understanding the existence of the three irregular work environments and the sexual harassment behaviors that occur in them. The third section provides an overview of the data and methods used here. The fourth section describes the first irregular work environment and discusses how the combination of many repeated coercive toasts, an amplified power dynamic, and striking gender segregation has made the business-drinking occasions an ideal breeding ground for sexual harassment and other workplace issues. In the fifth section, I depict the second irregular workspace—team-building activities—and argue that the popularity of sexualized shows and games on such occasions reflects an exploitative organizational culture and that management has used them as an instrument to strengthen hierarchy power and reinforce internal oppression. Then, in the sixth section, I move my focus from the traditional offline setting to sexual harassment in the online WeChat workspace and unpack the difference between WeChat harassment and conventional office sexual harassment. I end this article with a

brief consideration of the impacts of irregular workplace sexual harassment on individual employees as well as on the broader concept of equal work participation.

## THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

### Workplace Sexual Harassment

Legally, sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination that includes *quid pro quo* harassment and hostile environment harassment (MacKinnon 1979; Franke 1996). The former occurs when individuals' reaction to harassing behavior affects decisions about their employment.<sup>1</sup> Contrariwise, hostile environment sexual harassment "unreasonably interfer[es] with an individual's work performance or creat[es] an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment."<sup>2</sup> Psychologists conceptualize sexual harassment as a construct of "unwanted sex-related behavior at work" that recipients consider "as offensive, exceeding her resources, or threatening her well-being" (Fitzgerald, Swan, and Magley 1997, 15).

An accepted model developed by Louise Fitzgerald, Michele Gelfand, and Fritz Drasgow (1995) categorizes sexual harassment behaviors along three dimensions: gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion. Gender harassment is not necessarily sexual. It consists of a range of verbal and nonverbal acts that convey hostile, insulting, demeaning, or derisive attitudes toward a person's gender or sex (Gelfand, Fitzgerald, and Drasgow 1995). Examples include telling chauvinistic jokes, making gender-related degrading remarks, and posting pornographic pictures (Leskinen, Cortina, and Kabat 2011). Unwanted sexual attention involves unwelcome and unreciprocated behaviors that explicitly express sexual desire or intentions toward the recipient. It includes leering, ogling, touching, and explicitly or implicitly proposing sexual activities (Gelfand, Fitzgerald, and Drasgow 1995; O'Connell and Korabik 2000). Sexual coercion makes the condition of the recipient's employment in some way contingent on sexual cooperation (Gelfand, Fitzgerald, and Drasgow 1995; O'Connell and Korabik 2000).

The present research is grounded in two widely accepted theoretical explanations for why sexual harassment occurs: the organizational model and the socio-cultural model. The former, representing more of a socio-legal approach, emphasizes the idea that structural or formal power differences in organizations lead to sexual harassment and reinforce inequality (Tangri, Burt, and Johnson 1982; Welsh 1999). It suggests that individuals with formal or informal modes of power (for example, expertise or access to critical information) may be prone to engage in sexual harassment (Tangri, Burt, and Johnson 1982; Gruber and Bjorn 1986; Cleveland and Kerst 1993; Welsh 1999). It also suggests other organizational factors, such as the tolerance of sexual harassment, the gendered nature of an organization, and organizational norms and policies, that increase

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1. Equal Opportunity Employment Commission (EEOC), Guidelines on Discrimination Because of Sex, 29 C.F.R. § 1604.1 1 (1980) (EEOC Guidelines).

2. EEOC Guidelines.

the likelihood of sexual harassment (Fitzgerald et al. 1997; Dekker and Barling 1998; O'Hare and O'Donohue 1998; Willness, Steel, and Lee 2007; Pina and Gannon 2012).

The sociocultural model posits sexual harassment as “an outgrowth of the gender socialization process and a mechanism by which men assert power and maintain dominance over women” (Welsh 1999, 176; see also Tangri, Burt, and Johnson 1982; Pina, Gannon, and Saunders 2009). It aligns with the feminist theory in most legal literature that sexual harassment is a logical synthesis of the gender inequality, sexism, patriarchy, and male dominance that originates in a patriarchal society and extends to organizations (Farley 1978; MacKinnon 1979; Thomas and Kitzinger 1997). Nonetheless, legal feminist theorists have debated what sexual harassment is and means in the workplace. In her pathbreaking *Sexual Harassment of Working Women*, Catharine MacKinnon (1979) articulated the classic anti-subordination theory on sexual harassment: that sexual harassment produces, reinforces, and perpetuates an existing subordination of women in the workplace. Her underlying radical thesis is that male sexual conduct inherently subordinates women (Schwartz 2001). Arguing that MacKinnon's theory mistakenly conflates gender inequality and sexual relations, Vicki Schultz (1998, 1762), collaborating and engaging with sociologists and organizational theorists of sexual harassment, frames sexual harassment as conduct “that has the purpose or effect of undermining the perceived or actual competence of women (and some men) who threaten the idealized masculinity of those who do the work.” Rejecting the idea that harassing sexual conduct is discrimination “because of sex,” Katherine Franke (1996, 772) offers a revised anti-subordination account that perceives sexual harassment as a technology of sexism, of which the “use and effect police heteropatriarchy gender norms in the workplace.” Kathryn Abrams (1998, 1172) argues that sexual harassment “preserve[s] male control and entrench[es] masculine norms in the workplace” and thus integrates non-sexual forms of harassment and harassment of gender-nonconforming men into anti-subordination theory.

Both the organizational model and the socio-cultural theories posit the problematic use of power—either organizational hierarchy or gendered subordination—as the central concept of workplace sexual harassment. But power does not only exist inside the four walls of the workplace. Power and the misuse thereof can extend beyond the four walls of the conventional office or factory environment to other unconventional work settings where the hierarchical organizational power differentials and male dominance continue, which leads us to a logical inference: sexual harassment as an outgrowth of the two combined factors may also exist in these extended irregular workspaces.

### Sexual Harassment and Informal Workplace

Research on sexual harassment often focuses on the conventional office or factory setting, but some scholars have paid attention to the issue of gender inequality in informal workplace interactions. For example, Joan Acker (2006, 451) identified informal interaction practices that occur “doing the work” as one of the six organizing processes that recreate inequality and constitute organizational inequality regimes. Tessa Wright (2016) highlighted that informal workplace interactions are powerful

organizational processes that shape women's daily experiences for both good and ill in male-dominated construction and transport sectors. These studies acknowledge the particular power of informal interactions to affect the day-to-day experience and even survival of women in male-dominated workplaces, where sexuality is frequently employed as a tool to control women (Wright 2016). Both studies provided both inspiration and a theoretical foundation for this study's further exploration of sexual harassment practices in informal interactions in irregular work settings specifically. Neither distinguished between regular and irregular work settings; the present study demonstrates the importance of interactions that specifically take place outside of well-recognized working environments and often beyond regular working hours. Acker (2006) and Wright (2016) are still discussing workplace interactions—just informal ones. These informal interactions occur at the “boundary between work and social interaction” (Pringle 2008, S113). This boundary is subtle and often not acknowledged, which may complicate the application of formal organizational policies and practices (Healy, Bradley, and Forson 2011). The resulting vulnerability of victims of sexual harassment is even stronger in irregular work settings; the “workplace” character of these interactions is even blurrier. Victims, perpetrators, and those who hear victims' complaints may struggle to identify that perpetrators have transgressed, and applying formal organizational policies and laws may be more difficult. The precondition for addressing informal sexualized interactions in these irregular work settings, including sexual harassment, requires an updated understanding of what constitutes a workplace and an organizational policy and law that extends protection of employees to these lesser recognized workspaces.

Laurie Morgan and Karin Martin (2006) have explored how the work conducted in out-of-office settings affects professional saleswomen's careers. Their research found that in “heterosocial” settings, such as restaurants, bars, and hotel lobbies, assumptions of heterosexual pairings and norms of behavior put women at a disadvantage through either encountering sexual harassment or the work of avoiding it; while in “homosocial (masculine)” settings, such as golf courses and strip clubs, women are frequently excluded (Morgan and Martin 2006). Research as such, however, has neither isolated sexual harassment that occurs in informal work occasions as a specific set of issues nor deconstructed how informality may affect sexual harassment, which leaves this research void for the present study to fill.

Another line of scholarship that can be used to understand sexual harassment in irregular workplaces is the theory of precarity, a concept that is often associated with the concept of informality. Pierre Bourdieu (1963) introduced the term *précarité*, and he views precarity as not just a temporary shift between capital and labor power but also a “new mode of dominance” within the political economy of modernity (Bourdieu 1998, 85; Kalleberg and Vallas 2017, 4). Arne Kalleberg and Steven Vallas (2017, 1) define precarity as “the work that is uncertain, unstable, and insecure and in which employees bear the risks of work (as opposed to businesses or the government) and receive limited social benefits and statutory protections.” Precarity can refer to both subjective and objective conditions. Kalleberg (2009) describes precarity as the dominant feature of the social relations between employers and workers in the twenty-first century, and nowhere is this problem more evident than in China, the fastest growing economy in the world with the largest labor force (Lee and Kofman 2012). As Ching Kwan Lee

(2016, 319) noted, following over three decades of economic and legal reforms, “informal [precarious] employment has become a new normal for the Chinese workforce.” Precarious employment has a wide range of consequences on both work-related and nonwork areas of life; among them are that harassed employees have a heightened fear of resisting the treatment they suffer because job loss becomes ordinary and catastrophic.

Apart from the discussions on offline informal work settings, there is a growing academic interest in cyber sexual harassment generally that has a bearing on online workplace sexual harassment. Azy Barak (2005), for example, points out that the problematic legal status of the Internet, the dominant masculine cyberspace culture, and the disinhibition effects of anonymity, invisibility, and easy escape can encourage, reinforce, and even elicit harassment behaviors. Nicola Henry and Anastasia Powell (2015, 2018) coined the term “technology-facilitated sexual violence and harassment” (TFSV) to describe the use of new digital communication technologies to perpetrate sexually aggressive behaviors against women and emphasize the gendered and the psycho-social characters of the TFSV harms, which is a manifestation of re-traditionalized gender hierarchies and inequalities in the virtual context. Legal scholars have attempted to construct a new framework for the online sexual harassment liability (Citron 2009; Geach and Haralambous 2009; Franks 2011; Coletta 2017). Danielle Citron (2009), for example, discusses how online sexual harassment impedes women’s full participation in online life, and she analyzes the expressive role that law can play in wrestling with the trivialization of cyber sexual harassment and shaping online behaviors. Mary Anne Franks (2011) has proposed a “multi-setting” conception of sexual harassment that acknowledges that harassing acts take place in a traditionally unprotected setting (cyberspace) but produce effects in a protected setting and extend the third party liability to website operators. These burgeoning studies have captured well the social and psychological harm resulting from online sexual harassment (Biber et al. 2002; Barak 2005; Citron 2009; Franks 2011; Megarry 2014), which advances our understanding of sexual harassment in cyberspace. None of these studies focus on China or other non-Western contexts, however. In addition, failing to conceptualize the virtual context as an extension of the conventional workplace, none of these studies analyze how the organizational power hierarchy and gender inequalities continue to exert influence over the online work setting and thus shape the forms of online workplace sexual harassment and how the existence of sexual harassment in the virtual work setting impacts employees’ equal participation in the online world of work in a broader sense.

## THE SETTING: AN UPDATED UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHINESE WORKPLACE

Article 1010 of the Chinese Civil Code, adopted in May 2020, is the latest and highest level of sexual harassment law in the country.<sup>3</sup> It defines sexual harassment as a

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3. Civil Code of the People’s Republic of China, promulgated by the National People’s Congress, May 28, 2020, effective January 1, 2021.



tortious interpersonal injury to the victim's personality rights or dignity that can happen to anyone in any context. It identifies individual perpetrators as the bearers of primary legal liability, which institutions such as firms or schools bear only jointly with perpetrators. This approach sidesteps both the gender conflicts and power abuse embedded in the problem, and it has prompted courts to ignore the relatively vulnerable position of women in relation to men shaped by both the patriarchy and women's disadvantaged socioeconomic status in the workplace (Duan 2023). By failing to isolate workplace sexual harassment as a specific harm and providing no penalties for employers who fail to take reasonable measures against it gives employers little reason to combat the problem. Article 1010 also lacks an enforcement mechanism.

This section discusses four intertwined aspects of Chinese workplaces that make irregular work environments a progressively prominent extension of the conventional workplace within the legal context that exists: the role of *guanxi* (social relation, also known as social capital); organizational power distance; workplace gender dynamic; and the increasing use of mobile information and communication technologies (ICTs). These cultural and structural factors in Chinese society have led to the irregular work environments that this research addresses as well as some of the risks that employees face in these spaces. Often translated as "social relation" or social capital, *guanxi* refers to "the existence of direct particularistic ties between an individual and others" (Farh et al. 1998, 471). Such ties include family ties as well as ties between people who share an alma mater and who met in the workplace. *Guanxi* is highly influential in workplace relationships in China (Tsui and Farh 1997; Farh et al. 1998; Tsang 1998). It predicts positive job performance reviews (Cheung et al. 2009), rewards (Hu, Hsu, and Cheng 2004), and success in managing others (Xiao and Tsui 2007). Because it is an important element of career advancement, employees participate in activities and exchanges outside the conventional workplace or after work hours, and this participation is only effective if employees behave in ways that please their managers. Thus, *guanxi* both creates the irregular workplaces on which this article focuses and strengthens the power dynamics that exist within them. Further, sexual harassment victims may be discouraged from reporting or exposing perpetrators in fear of losing *guanxi*.

While irregular workplaces, for reasons described below, might be sites of vulnerability to sexual harassment in any number of cultures, power distance, which is "the extent to which a society accepts the fact that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally," exacerbates such vulnerability in China. One of the dimensions that Geert Hofstede (2001, 98) used to categorize cultures for individuals, power distance refers to the degree to which individuals accept the legitimacy of unequally distributed and excised power in institutions, organizations, and societies (see also Farh, Hackett, and Liang 2007; Kirkman et al. 2009). People in high power distance cultures like China tend to respect the social hierarchy (Hofstede 1984; Kirkman et al. 2009), and they tend to defer to individuals holding positions of higher prestige or power (Hofstede 1984; Bochner and Hesketh 1994; Kirkman et al. 2009). The status quo of social structure is emphasized, and obedience to authority is valued (Farh, Hackett, and Liang 2007; Kirkman et al. 2009). This high-power distance characteristic is strikingly evinced in Chinese workplace settings. Managers have significant power and control over subordinates, and employees tend to have an unquestioning, submissive attitude, accepting abusive supervision (Lian, Ferris, and

Brown 2012; Lin, Wang, and Chen 2013), which exacerbates power abuse and unethical behaviors (Khatri 2009). An understanding of how power distance functions in a social setting is essential for an effective study of sexual harassment since sexual harassment is not simply an expression of human desire but, rather, a method of exercising power of dominance.

The workplace gender dynamic in China reflects gender gaps in labor force participation and earnings as well as strong occupational segregation (Bauer et al. 1992; Gustafsson and Li 2000; Shu and Bian 2003; Shu 2005; Zhang et al. 2008; Zhang, Hannum, and Wang 2008; He and Wu 2017). Women are more likely than men to work in lower-paid positions, occupations, industries, and sectors of the economy. They also face gender-based discrimination in terms of recruitment, termination rates, and payment as well as sexual harassment (Bauer et al. 1992; Parish, Das, and Laumann 2006; Lu 2009; Kuhn and Shen 2013). Equal rights law dating to the original writing of the country's Constitution in 1954 as well as the 2005 Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests and the 2018 Labor Law of the People's Republic of China are poorly enforced, and the rejuvenation of traditional patriarchal gender norms in the marketization era has overshadowed any influence of egalitarian Marxist gender ideology (He and Wu 2017; Ji et al. 2017).<sup>4</sup>

Studies show that Chinese companies have a highly masculine and sexualized organizational culture. Highly educated middle-class women in China report that their employers institutionally and deliberately deploy women's sexuality in their business practices, such as by encouraging sexual innuendo at work, claiming it enhances productivity, and requiring female employees to escort clients at banquets, karaoke parties, and saunas (Liu 2017). Female employees are understood as helpers to men, whose business goals are paramount, and their bodies are property to be sexually exploited for managers' or the corporation's ends (Liu 2017). Such an account of the treatment of female employees' working experiences in a male-encoded workplace aligns with Simone Beauvoir's (2010) description of women as inevitably "other." Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that workplace sexual harassment—"a way for dominant men to label women (and perceived 'lesser' men) as inferior and shore up an idealized masculine work status and identity," as theorized by Schultz (2018, 24)—would be prevalent.

Finally, increasing digitalization is another important factor affecting the sexual harassment landscape in China because it contributes to shaping the current landscape of the workplace by extending the reach of the workplace into the digital realm. Harassment in digital exchanges is often invisible to others in the workplace, yet they relate back to offline relationships at work. The increasing use of mobile ICTs in the workplace was in place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Cascio and Montealegre 2016; Colbert, Yee, and George 2016) and has been exacerbated by it

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4. Constitution of the People's Republic of China, art. 96, § 3 (1954); Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests (2005 Amendment) (promulgated by the Standing Committee, National People's Congress, August 28, 2005, effective December 1, 2005), CLI.1.59781(EN) (Lawinfochina); Labor Law of the People's Republic of China (2018 Amendment) (promulgated by the Standing Committee, National People's Congress, July 5, 1994, effective January 1, 1995, amended December 29, 2018, effective December 29, 2018) art. 36, CLI.1.328222(EN) (Lawinfochina).



(Kniffin et al. 2021). The portability, ubiquity, unobtrusiveness, and convenience of mobile devices have created an “always-on and connected” society where workers’ personal and work time blurs (Middleton 2007; Derks and Bakker 2014; Butts, Becker, and Boswell 2015). In China, much of this shift has involved the multi-purpose application of WeChat, which has become the major platform for work communication. Because WeChat is also a social platform, its use at work further incorporates individuals’ professional and private lives, facilitating and adding complexity to sexually offensive practices on the platform.

## DATA AND METHODS

This article is part of a larger research project on sexual harassment and the regulation thereof in China. The data presented in this research is primarily drawn from fifty-seven semi-structured interviews that I conducted with Chinese employees who experienced workplace sexual harassment, supplemented with data collected through participant observation. Initially, I conducted in-depth interviews to get a sense of the current experience of employees with sexual harassment without knowing the prevalence or severity of the sexual harassment prior to the interviews; when I started hearing their experiences, however, the importance of these irregular settings—both as contexts for transacting business and as sites of sexual harassment—began to emerge. I also marshaled evidence published online in the main news outlets and drew data from legal documents to provide readers with information and context relevant to the irregular work environment and sexual harassment practices therein. Beijing Qianqian Law Firm, formerly known as the Legal Research and Service Center for Women of Peking University, allowed me access to their databases, personal connections with the firm, and the opportunity, as a legal assistant, to participate in sexual harassment case litigation.

Sample recruitment began in October 2020 through a multi-method approach. First, I posted an interview recruitment poster that I had designed, inviting employees to contact me if they had sexual harassment experiences in the workplace. I posted it on my personal social media account on major platforms, including Weibo, Zhihu, Douban, and WeChat Moment, and asked my personal contacts to share it. My influence on social media is limited, and the response rate was low at first, but colleagues at Qianqian helped me connect with other domestic public interest institutions and influential activists, and their reposts were effective. I also met victims of workplace sexual harassment in Qianqian’s office and spoke to them through the firm’s hotline for victims. In such cases, I introduced my research project and directly invited them to participate in the in-depth interviews. I also used the snowball method, asking interviewees to invite other sexual harassment victims to volunteer for the study (Weiss 1995; Lofland et al. 2006).

In total, fifty-seven individuals agreed to be interviewed. The fifty-seven respondents were a fairly heterogeneous group in terms of age, occupation, education, and marital status. Workers in twenty-six industries who resided in twenty-one provinces participated. There were three male respondents and fifty-four women. All names of respondents in this article are pseudonyms. Interviews typically lasted 1–1.5

hours, and most were audio-recorded and transcribed. I kept detailed field notes and compiled them after the interviews when participants did not consent to recording. Due to travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted primarily by remote communications, such as phone calls and virtual meetings (audio and video), but I conducted in-person interviews with a few respondents who resided in Beijing. Interviewing victims of workplace sexual harassment is challenging because they were evasive in discussing their encounters with the harassers and in giving their assessment of the remedy mechanisms provided by their employers or the legal authorities. I referred to a prepared battery of semi-structured and open-ended questions relating to respondents' experiences with workplace sexual harassment in order to be sure that I would cover all ground in the interviews, but I took an approach with little structure in actually conducting the interviews. Our discussions were formed as casual conversations where I asked participants to narrate their encounters with sexual harassment at work occasions. This allowed for the emergence of unexpected topics, which often highlighted the importance of irregular workplaces as sites of sexual harassment.

My status as a native Chinese speaker and a female researcher and my position at a domestic legal aid center greatly facilitated the interviews. I employed a variety of strategies to mitigate the potential harm of eliciting emotions such as anger, anxiety, sadness, and the fear of repercussions from appearing to question the behavior of their employers or legal authorities that failed to protect them during my interviews. Prior to conducting the interviews, I ran test interviews with my colleagues at the legal aid center before interviewing clients to identify any questions that might seem judgmental or that might need to be worded differently. Before conducting the interview, I communicated to participants my identity and my research purposes as well as offering assurances of confidentiality and privacy. I scheduled the interviews in spaces I considered safe and that interviewees had approved or, when interviewing remotely, used the platform the interviewee preferred. At the start of the interviews, I let the interviewee know that I was aware that we were discussing a sensitive topic and that they were free to pause or stop the conversation at any time. I then communicated in a nonjudgmental, empathic, and respectful manner and paid careful attention to any signs of distress during the interviews. When asking potentially distressing questions, I explained why I was asking and dropped any questions and lines of inquiry that the interviewees stated made them uncomfortable. When I saw signs of distress or reluctance to talk, I paused and reminded the interviewee that we could take a break at any time or stop the interview if they wanted.

My reliance on connections with influential public interest institutions to solicit respondents and use of the Internet limited my sample. Most of my interviewees were white-collar or pink-collar employees who worked in office environments. After realizing these limitations, I traveled to Longhua, an industrial district in Shenzhen, in June 2021. There, I lived in the Da Shuikeng, a migrant neighborhood with a very dense and transitory population. However, my plan to approach and recruit migrant factory workers with the help of the local social service centers was disappointing. Rounds of calls for participation in various workers' groups produced two interviewees. As my efforts to recruit interviewees in Longhua had little success, I became an assembly worker in a local television manufacturing factory with the

aid of a local grassroots organization. I spent two weeks in the television factory, where I assembled the back of televisions in its workshop, ate in its dining hall, and slept in its dormitory. I was also able to join their WeChat groups, where I could observe workers' online communications. In addition to talking to factory workers in the workshops and observing interactions among workers, I witnessed some sexual harassment incidents firsthand. I discussed these harassment incidents with colleagues who were either directly involved or witnessed them.

While I was working there, I never told my colleagues that I was a researcher; I revealed my research project to them and that I was a researcher after I had left the factory. For seven of these workers, I did so during a dinner I gave at a restaurant that colleagues attended at my invitation. I provided detailed information regarding my research, and those present gave their consent retrospectively. For those who were not able to attend the dinner, I contacted them and explained my research through cellphone calls or WeChat messages, and they all gave consent retrospectively. All of them gave consent promptly and, seemingly, enthusiastically. They were surprised at first but then curious about my research. They shared their insights and the stories they knew about the research topic to enhance my research. They were pleased to know that they had, however unwittingly, advanced research that might advance the cause of preventing future sexual harassment. I chose not to inform my fellow workers of the nature of my research during my work in the factory for two reasons. First, doing so enabled me to gain access to factory workshops and observe behaviors that might otherwise remain hidden had they known I was a researcher. Second, I avoided any observer effect, and the data collected in this manner is of high validity since I observed the participants in their natural environment. A downside was that it was impossible to take notes in the workshop so I wrote down my recollection of the observations as soon as I returned to the dormitory in the evening. This obviously had some limitations, but the fieldwork in Longhua provided valuable supplemental data for the interviews collected in the present research.

To analyze the interview and the observational data, I conducted a narrative analysis to identify the recurring themes in participants' narratives, including when and where the sexual harassment incidents occurred, the factors that influence their perceptions and responses, and the handling procedure after the incidents. Workplace sexual harassment that took place in irregular work environments emerged as an important subcategory. For example, ten out of the fifty-seven people I interviewed had experienced sexual harassment at business drinking occasions; thirteen had experienced sexual harassment at team-building events; twenty-seven had encountered sexual harassment from work-related people on WeChat platforms. I recorded the incidents containing the factor of informal work scenarios and systematically analyzed each instance.

## ENVIRONMENT ONE: BUSINESS DRINKING OCCASIONS

The interweaving effects of conventional power hierarchy and the coercive drinking practices make the so-called business banquet, often called *ying chou*, a high-risk irregular work environment. At these social gatherings and dinners among

colleagues and (potential) clients, which are accompanied by rounds of drinks, toasts are proposed largely as a pretext to draining the glass in one shot and the expectation of others to do so as well. Refills are endless. It is common to drink at business dinners until one is inebriated or has trouble walking. Chinese workers recognize such drinking occasions as part of their work of strengthening social interconnectivity within their firms, showing their obedience to their bosses and pleasing clients and potential clients. Indeed, business drinking may facilitate business communication, career connections, and business deals. But failing to drink at business drinking tables is no more an option than failing to attend as it would cause an employee's superiors or clients to lose face, and the employees would bear the consequences.

Existing research has failed to interrogate sexual harassment at business drinking occasions because it has generally failed to recognize the business drinking table as an extension of the workplace. Yet, when attendance is compulsory, it clearly is such an extension. The combination of power and alcohol makes the business drinking occasion a harsh and hostile informal working environment where bias, humiliation, harassment, and coercion are omnipresent with the stimulation of power and alcohol. As an anesthetic drink, alcohol can blunt civility norms and lead to vicious acts, especially in a high-power-distance environment, which is the typical environment for sexual harassment behaviors. Interviewees described these sexual harassment experiences at drinking tables as nightmares, which endanger their health, dignity, and even socioeconomic status.

In the following section, I examine forms of sexual harassment behaviors that interviewees reported they faced at the drinking tables. I unpack the distinctions between these experiences and those that occur in offices and factories. Then I shift the focus to two of the main features of the business drinking occasion: a conventional vertical power hierarchy and striking gender segregation. As I describe, the irregularity of the environment and the involvement of alcohol can amplify organizational power differences, making it easy for higher-ranking superiors to abuse and dominate lower-ranking employees. The segregation I describe manifests in the assignment of distinct tasks according to gender at the drinking tables, which can exacerbate women's already disadvantaged position in employment contexts. At the end of this section, I outline the harms of sexual harassment at the drinking tables and the implications of these consequences.

My research found that all three categories of sexual harassment—gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion—exist at the business drinking tables. Most of the sexual harassment that interviewees faced was perpetrated by male supervisors and clients rather than peers. It included both verbal and physical behavior. They reported humiliating comments about their own or other women's physical characteristics, clothing, makeup, and voices, invasive and inappropriate questions, sex-related jokes, descriptions of sexual experiences or sexual organs, and requests for sex. They also reported unwanted touching, hugging, kissing, groping, violent intercourse, and other acts. Although the interviewees did not report significant differences in forms of harassment behaviors between those at the drinking tables and in the office, most of them said that the severity and sexual explicitness of harassment behaviors at business drinking occasions were at levels higher than those in conventional office settings. Harassment tended to escalate over the course of the

evening as the inebriation of both the harasser and the victim increased. Song Kaiwen was one of the interviewees I spoke with for this research. She described the sexual harassment she experienced at a business drinking table where ten people were sitting around a round table in the private room of a restaurant. She had started to feel “dazed and nauseous” from the drinks that were pressed upon her:

I was placed between the potential client and my boss [a middle-aged woman]. I was neither a high-ranking officer nor a project leader, and I knew that I had been chosen for my youth and attractiveness as a 24-year-old good-looking woman. My boss and colleagues had been behaving in a subservient and servile manner throughout the meeting. Everyone knew my boss was eager to win a contract from the client. Then, the potential client was getting close to me. I could even smell alcohol on his breath. I tried to stay awake and wished it would be over soon. I resolved I would not let him touch me, but soon I felt a hand on my legs, moving towards my genitals. I froze for a moment, then turned to my boss, hoping she would help. But my boss didn't even look at me. She was talking about the potential deal. Humiliated and furious, I jumped up. Crying, I ran out.

According to Kaiwen, her boss ridiculed her for embarrassing the client, saying that she was “good for nothing,” and, for the same reason, she received negative feedback in her performance review. Another interviewee, Wang Qiong, had a similar experience as an intern at a television station in Hunan Province. She explained that the station's associate director had told her that the party where a producer harassed her was “a chance” and that she “shouldn't bother coming in again” if she did not attend. Like Kaiwen, she was manipulated into sitting next to an older man at a big round table in a private dining room. The producer began asking her intrusive questions: “He seemed very happy, staring at me and inquiring about my personal information, age, family, relationship history, and sexual experiences. I was mortified by his questions but too craven to leave at that time. He became more brazen, putting his arms around me, kissing me on my lips, and joking that it was the blush on my cheek that turned him on. I was only 21. It was such a nightmare.”

Several interviewees who had experienced sexual harassment in the office environment said that harassing acts at drinking tables tended to be more offensive, humiliating, and sexually explicit. For example, Xiao Mai, an administrative assistant at a state-owned financial investment enterprise in Beijing, said that in the office her “[male] colleagues sometimes would make inappropriate jokes, at worst, sexual innuendos. But those were nothing compared to what they would say at the drinking tables. The drinking room was awash with filthy words like ‘F\*\*k’ or ‘Pu\*\*y.’” Similarly, Lu Shanshan said, “[i]n the office, those guys dared make disgusting misogyny comments only secretly and moderately. But once sitting at the drinking table, driven by alcohol, they acted like they had no scruple of expressing their sexism and fondling us. It was like the alcohol released a separate personality.” Interviewees felt that the harassers found it exciting to assault them in view of others. A male interviewee, Feng Li, who worked at a fund management company in Shenzhen City said that he saw men from his company groping interns overtly at the drinking table “as if it was the right thing to do.”

The relative informality of these work-related social occasions seems to add to victims' vulnerability. The topic of discussion is rarely work related, and not feeling pressure to seem to be working offers liberty to commit sexual harassment. Alcohol also tends to be used to justify harassing acts. Interviewees described being dismissed when they made complaints. Their harassers would make statements like: "We were all drunk. It was just alcohol" and "She might have seduced me first since I was too drunk to force her" or "She wanted that to happen, otherwise she would not have gotten drunk with me in the first place. She was just too shy to admit it." It is extremely difficult to refuse to get drunk with colleagues who may expect a small woman to match them drink for drink, and this rule is unwritten and hence easily minimized in such claims. Thus, the drinking tables become a space that protects all types of acts, other than declining to attend or to drink.

The presence of clients or potential clients tends to increase the danger. If the primary function of an event is to please a client or potential client, it is easy for them to get away with harassment. There is a tradition of providing female bodies to satisfy the sexual desires of male clients. As Kaiwen said, "[m]y boss was almost like a pimp. I felt that she sold me for money." Some supervisors harass women to normalize clients' behavior. Song Yang, a graphic designer in a design firm in Xi'an City, explained that her supervisor had promised to protect her if the client was "out of line." They both knew that she had been invited to the dinner and subsequent karaoke event because he thought it would please the client to have a young and pretty woman along. Yang understood that she would be expected to put up with verbal harassment and perhaps limited physical contact to please her boss, but she did not welcome the prospect of harassment merely because it would stop short of assault.

The conventional vertical power hierarchy is stark at business drinking occasions. There is often a strict vertical hierarchy according to economic status, with the superior or the client at the top. According to my interviewees, many business banquets happened in private dining rooms with large round tables and spinning Lazy Susans. There are unspoken and strict rules about seating. The person at the top of the hierarchy sits the farthest from the door, back facing the wall. Everyone knows that the person in this seat is due the greatest respect or face. While tradition would put the second-highest and third-highest attendee on either side of the person at the top of the hierarchy, interviewees reported that it was common to put low-ranking women—the young women installed to entertain the person (usually a man) at the top of the hierarchy—in these seats. The person in the position of highest power at the table dominates conversations at the table and can subordinate others, which sets the tone. The power structure makes it difficult for anyone present to resist the pressure to drink until inebriated or sexual harassment. Refusal has real costs in career development and economic benefits.

Female employees are treated as erotic business instruments. Male and female employees are all potential victims of exploitation and oppression in a toxic business drinking environment. Both may be coerced to drink but for different purposes. Drinking has been seen as a measure of a man's resolve, trustworthiness, and ability as well as obedience. As Feng Li explained, "[b]eing able to drink a lot is definitely an added bonus in my company, which is positively linked to how much the boss likes you." Similarly, Kaiwen said some of her male colleagues had complained to her about



the toxic business drinking practice, but, nonetheless, they bowed to pressure. A man who can drink a lot is viewed in a positive light—someone whose career should progress. Matching a client drink for drink is considered friendly, and likely to close the deal and win favor with one's employer.

In contrast, drinking does not necessarily advance a woman's career, though it may prevent her from being fired. While a few women, such as Kaiwen's boss, can rise in Chinese organizations by assimilating to the male-dominated culture, most of the women will be considered in light of their sexual power instead of their business acumen. They are expected to serve as companions, "trophy girls," or "eye candies." Their job is to listen and ingratiate themselves with the attendees in power and to serve as erotic tools to entertain powerful males. Their opinions related to business-related topics are not solicited. A woman's refusal to drink may be laughed off as a sign of conservativeness or shyness. But it is not always, and those who do want to rise tend to feel they need to match men drink for drink. Zong Ping was an insurance saleswoman who worked in an insurance company in Beijing who had also experienced sexual harassment at business drinking occasions. She told me that she had been "forced to develop an adaptive ability to deal with the drinking culture." She had to attend business dinners regularly to solicit customers as part of her job, and she drank to prove that she was as good at sales as men. However, she felt she was compromising her health.

The business drinking table, as an extended and irregular workplace, is a microcosm of the dark side of the Chinese industry. Additionally, business drinking is widely practiced in other kinds of work environments, such as academic settings, as a means of male bonding (Song and Hird 2013). Business drinking is coercive in and of itself, reflecting an environment where social pressure and workplace pressure approach coercion in and of themselves; in this context, sexual harassment is therefore not merely an expression of sexual desires or sexism but also a manifestation of strong bullying characteristics and a way for those in power to consolidate the existing power structure. It combines three vicious elements—many repeated, coercive toasts, a bullying power dynamic, and striking gender segregation—and many Chinese employees who I interviewed described it as the most dreadful part of their work life. The amplified power hierarchy and the lax context, powered by alcohol, have produced an ideal breeding ground for workplace issues such as sexual harassment. The exercise of organizational power in a vertical hierarchy to consolidate internal oppression and male dominance serve as justification for sexual harassment in these contexts, and the informality of this extended irregular work environment allows for the exacerbation of the harassing behaviors.

The drinking table represents an insidious intersection of informality, alcohol, oppression, and sexual coercion that is particularly dangerous. Given the resulting victimization, sexual harassment at business drinking occasions should be a priority when considering regulation from organizations and laws, but most attention remains on sexual harassment in offices. People generally consider business drinking occasions to be social activities where organizational or industrial rules of conduct do not apply, and existing laws have not stipulated what constitutes harassing acts in such environments or acknowledged that they can cause inequality in the workplace. None of the employers of the study's participants had addressed sexual harassment at the business

drinking table as an extension of the traditional workspace, as they clearly must do. Addressing this context requires banning coercion to drink and enacting consequences for employees who use the bodies of others to please themselves or anyone else in this context. The business drinking table has essentially acted as a loophole for some harassers who might not feel they can harass in traditional workspaces.

## ENVIRONMENT TWO: SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN TEAM-BUILDING ACTIVITIES

Initially, team building refers to a set of organization development strategies to foster interpersonal relations and facilitate the effectiveness of work teams (Tannenbaum, Beard, and Salas 1992). Many Chinese organizations have adopted team building as a way to improve their organizational effectiveness. Managers also frame it as a way to decrease work anxiety and, for those that involve physical exertion, improve health. Team-building activities generally fall into three categories based on function: ice-breaking activities for newly hired employees or new teams, regular team-bonding activities for pre-existing groups, and celebration events, such as an annual party. Activities might include networking exercises, ice-breaking games, team sports, and so on. They are typically held at regular intervals, ranging from a monthly to yearly basis, and are compulsory to attend. Team-building activities may also include short trips, but they occur less commonly, usually only once a year at the most. Research on team-building activities in Chinese workplaces is lacking, making it difficult to determine what types of activities are most commonly used by which types of companies or institutions. Although the coverage on the major news outlets has been centered on the abusive team-building strategies adopted by technology companies, whether certain sectors use team-building activities more than others, and whether abusive and harassing behaviors in team-building activities are more prevalent in certain types of companies remains unclear. Of the fifty-seven people I interviewed for this study, thirteen had experienced sexual harassment at team-building events, and they were employed in a variety of sectors, including both private and government entities. My interviews with them, much like media coverage, suggest that team-building events have become a site for sexual harassment, and employees feel they are neither an organization development strategy nor an employee benefit. Much like business dinners, they are often scheduled after work hours, and, like business dinners, they are both informal and compulsory. The games and interactions involved are often sexually suggestive or explicit, privacy invasive, and humiliating. Refusing to attend such team-building occasions and participate in sexualized games will be considered disobedience to the management, and people who do so are considered difficult.

The forms of sexual harassment in team-building activities are many; as in other environments, they may be verbal or physical, ranging from gender harassment, and unwanted sexual attention, to sexual coercion. But the type of harassment that the interviewees referenced the most often was the use of sexually suggestive games and performances, which generally falls into the gender harassment category. For instance, many organizations require their employees to play "Truth or Dare," which can easily involve sexual topics. Jia Xing, a male mobile phone game developer in Hangzhou City,

said in his interview that sex-related topics had become a staple of such games in his organization. He explained: “The ‘Truth’ part typically involved asking intimate questions that make people feel abashed, such as ‘when did you lose your virginity?’ ‘When was the last time you had sex?’ or ‘what position did you use last time you had sex?’ The ‘Dare’ part included drinking a certain amount of alcohol, kissing someone in the room, taking off one piece of underwear, etc.” According to the interviewees, such sexually explicit interactions were unlikely to occur in conventional workplace settings. Yet the power dynamics derived from conventional office settings are abused, unhinged, and allowed to run rampant in irregular workplace settings such as team-building events that are not subject to scrutiny.

Sometimes the losers of more innocuous games are required to make a performance with sexual content. Qiao Yin, a female fitness coach who works in Beijing, said in her interview that, as the only female coach in her workplace, she found it extremely humiliating when her boss told her to moan as she might when having sex after she lost a card game in a team-building party. A female employee of an e-commerce company in Qingdao City, Xiang Li, said that she and other women were asked to lie under male colleagues while they did push-ups at an ice-breaking party her company held. “I felt so overwhelmed. I could tell that those male employees were embarrassed as well. However, at that time, as we were all newly hired in this company, none of us had any choice but to do what they asked us,” she said. This concept of no choice emphasizes the norms of power dynamics in Chinese workplaces.

Interviewees’ reports of experiencing sexually suggestive or explicit shows and games are not isolated incidents. There have also been repeated accounts of such shows and games from other sources. For example, at a 2017 Tencent Instant Message Department year-end party, several female employees and male employees were asked to stand on the stage. Then the host told the men to position water bottles between their thighs and the women to kneel and then open the water bottles with their mouths (Chen 2017). As with the business drinking tables, drinking often facilitates sexual harassment in these environments. Team-building parties also sometimes involve overnight stays, with the attending increased risk of harassment and assault. For instance, in a five-day team-building trip to Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, Wang Yihong said that she had told her boss many times over the boozy dinner that she would not have sex with him. She said that at midnight “he pounded on my hotel room door and shouted my name. I was so afraid and didn’t know what to do at all.” Yihong was in her first year out of law school at the time. A guest in the room next to hers called the front desk, and the hotel sent security. Yihong said: “I dread to think what would have happened.” The next morning, he greeted her with a smile at breakfast and approached her to say that he had “forgotten himself” because he had so much to drink. He asked her, as she said, “not to take it personally.”

In the battle against workplace sexual harassment, the harassers clearly control the team-building space for now. Along with business dinners, they have become a site in which sexual harassment has penetrated the time when employees should be at leisure. Much as the impetus to please clients and preserve face in front of them supports sexual harassment at business drinking occasions, the ostensible reason for team-building activities—to improve the connection between team members—can give cover for sexual harassment. Yet power, more than the sexual desire of either the client or the

boss, remains at the center of these interactions. Informality is posited as a key part of such connection and normal socializing and extended to sexual impropriety. Likewise, workers who resist such impropriety may be accused of undermining team cohesion. As Wu Shuang, a female real estate agent in a property company in Luoyang City recalled in her interview:

My firm organizes team-building activities, such as Karaoke parties, hiking activities, the real-life escape room games on a regular basis, claiming that these are company welfare for us to expand our career networks and share sales experiences with each other. But they are actually not welfare for us female agents but “welfare” for our manager and other male colleagues. More than once my manager and male colleagues made dirty comments about me and even got handsy with me at these team-building parties. It was so insufferable that I made up excuses to avoid attending, but what waited for me was the rebuke from my manager for my lack of solidarity as an employee and being difficult as a colleague.

Sexually explicit pranks and acts demeaning to female employees have been framed as a symbol of openness and freedom, and, thus, refusing to attend may prompt accusations of being conservative and old-fashioned. As Wu Shuang said, “[s]ome colleagues sneered at me when I expressed my discomfort with their comments, asking me, ‘come on, what is this, 1900? How can you still live with the last century’s mores?’” While the sexually harassing acts, such as being “handsy” may be on a continuum with behaviors that are appropriate in dating or between consensual sexual partners, the response to resistance is purely about business hierarchies. The damage is to the victim’s career.

There were many stories revealing the compulsory nature of team-building activities. Du Wenyi, a female administrative staff of an advertising company in Kunming City, said that her manager insinuated that she might lose her year-end bonus for her nonattendance. Similarly, Ji Mengchen, a female intern in an entertainment company in Chengdu, said that her supervisor told her to leave the company, saying she clearly was not willing to accept the company culture because she had expressed resistance. Both Wenyi and Mengchen attended team-building activities because of the pressure they experienced, and both were forced to make sexually suggestive performances in the presence of a group of co-workers. Such coercion is a demonstration of power and a violation of sexual freedom, a fundamental component of personal freedom. Events billed as team building actually become a proving ground for employees’ obedience to their superiors. Superiors recruit and domesticate employees, strengthening their power and thus enabling continued harassment in a feedback loop. More than the sexual gratification of superiors, sexual harassment becomes an instrument of reinforcing the domination and oppression of their employees. In this sense, the sexual gratification of superiors is merely the means to the end of domination. Workers who resist can sacrifice their livelihood; workers who go against their deepest instincts can suffer moral injury (Shay 2014).

Sexual harassment at team-building events illustrates the managers’ domination not just over female employees but also over male employees. In workplaces that were almost exclusively male, team-building activities could also be extremely sexualized.

Qin Lang, a male interviewee who had just begun working at a state-owned corporation at the time of our interview, reported that, after an ice-breaking dinner, his superior invited him along with two other new hires to an unlicensed massage establishment for prostitution. Amidst horror and disgust, Qin Lang diplomatically declined the invitation on the grounds that he had another plan that day. Nevertheless, shortly after the event, Qin Lang found he had been excluded from participating in the important office discussions led by his superior. As Qin Lang recalled,

I expected he [my boss] might be upset that I refused his invitation, but I did not expect such serious consequences. I learned later that my boss's "invitation" was actually a test to see if I could be obedient to him after sharing this experience with my friend, who is a senior executive in another department of the same organization. Likewise, if I were to [patronize a] prostitute with him, that would mean I engaged in something illegal and unethical with him, and that would enable us to trust each other and prevent us from betraying each other.

Sexual harassment is clearly a male privilege, and even men who face it have the option to use it against female employees in the future. Yet its permutations against male employees during team-building activities reflect the importance of power—in this case, organizational hierarchy.

Sexual harassment at team-building events has great influence on a workplace environment because organizations present these events as an articulation of organizational identity and a crucial way of supporting the organization's mission. Thus, in presenting obviously sexually humiliating games and coerced performances as acceptable in these contexts, managers articulate that they will tolerate sexual harassment in business contexts generally. Unlike sexual harassment in the conventional office context, which is often hidden, harassment at team-building parties is frequently performed in front of an audience, and often explicitly perpetrated at the behest of the group or the entire organization. Harassment at team-building activities has a very public character, which supports the packaging of sexualized acts as entertainment. Management and organizations deny the oppressive nature of such extremely sexualized games as well as denying that such atypical environments are extensions of the workplace where rules would apply.

Spectacles such as forcing employees to simulate oral sex in front of their colleagues, such as at the Tencent Year-end Party (Chen 2017), express an affinity for sexism and sexual humiliation within the corporate culture. Everyone present recognizes that all of the company's managers, as well as the corporation itself, supports or, at the very least, does not dare undermine the person in authority who exerts power over their colleagues. The public and performative nature of sexual harassing acts at team-building parties, like open harassment at business drinking occasions, means that the audience may extend beyond those physically present, increasing the harassed employees' feelings of humiliation. Team-building activities act as training or education. By internalizing the corporate value of sexual harassment and humiliation, participants may learn to commit harassment in other spaces. Internalizing corporate values is typically an effective way of moving up within an organization,

which reinforces the impact. This grooming of would-be harassers as future managers at the expense of the career advancement of individuals who might resist such behavior ensures the perpetuation of the problem.

### ENVIRONMENT THREE: WECHAT SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Much like at business drinking occasions and team-building activities, the WeChat platform has become a site of blurred professional and personal boundaries that facilitates ambiguous and sexual interactions among work-related people, thus leading to the occurrence of sexual harassment. WeChat harassment, as a form of cyber harassment, can not only cause damage to the harassed individuals' (mostly women's) mental and physical health but also has a broader consequence on women's full participation in the future online world of work. In addition, unlike cyber sexual harassment on anonymous social media, WeChat sexual harassment generates immediate results in employees' offline office or factory life by directly affecting their work conditions and social relations and so can be particularly problematic.

Interviewees in the current research acknowledged that WeChat functions as an informal mobile office, and it is the social platform that they use most often at work. WeChat's multipurpose smartphone application was first released in January 2011 (Montag, Becker, and Gan 2018). It functions as both a personal communication application and a virtual workspace. It could be described as a hybrid of Western countries' most popular social media platforms, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, FaceTime, LinkedIn, and Slack. It offers text/voice messaging, audio/video chatting (one-to-one private and group), the opportunity to post and share updates, mobile payment, and other features. With currently over 1.3 billion monthly active users, WeChat has become one of the most ubiquitous applications on smartphones and an integral part of everyday life for many Chinese (Thomala 2023). According to a report released in 2017 by China Tech Insights, an English research unit affiliated with Tencent's Online Media Group, WeChat has become a major work communication tool for approximately 90 percent of users (China Tech Insights 2017). Because of its unparalleled convenience and efficiency, many organizations have adopted WeChat for work purposes, such as online group meetings, work assignments, and work-related discussions.

WeChat sexual harassment can be defined as the use of WeChat as a virtual platform to make uninvited sexual advances, communications, or interactions with another person or entity. Direct WeChat communication occurs both one on one and in groups, and different types of sexual harassment tend to exist in each type of communication. Of the fifty-seven interviewees in this research, twenty-seven of them mentioned sexual harassment experienced in the WeChat communications with work-related people, including but not limited to colleagues, supervisors, employees, and clients. Among these individuals, fifteen had experienced gender harassment, fourteen had received unwanted-sexual-attention messages from their work-related WeChat contacts, and thirteen had experienced sexual coercion from their work-related WeChat contacts. One continued to receive harassing WeChat requests threatening to ruin her career if she exposed her harasser even after she left his company. The merging



of personal life and professional life on WeChat has facilitated the growth of sexual harassment on the platform. WeChat “friends” include supervisors and colleagues on equal footing with families, lovers, and friends. Only psychological boundaries distinguish professional and private domains, which is likely to produce more confusion. Employees express and may actually feel a fair amount of confusion over the line between professional and private relations and the behavior appropriate to each. The increase and frequency of interactions among work-related people in non-work time worsen the problem. WeChat interactions blur the lines between professional discussions and communications with friends. Interviewees report that communication topics with colleagues and supervisors tend to go beyond the scope of work and include personal affairs. Sexualized discussions can happen as a result, both in WeChat communication between individual workers and in WeChat workgroups. While they are disembodied, these sexualized interactions created a hostile virtual work environment much as workplace sexual harassment in other venues can do.

Aside from the other factors that prevent victims from reporting harassment even in conventional workplaces, such as fear of repercussions, the confusion over whether WeChat interaction is work also contributes to the failure of victims to report. While a few enterprises might have codes of conduct for offline organizational communication that could be applied to the virtual workspace of WeChat, it is generally unclear whether they will be. Given the poor enforcement of such policies in general and a minimal recognition that WeChat workgroups are part of the workplace, interviewees had no such expectation, and none of them had sought redress for their suffering from human resources departments.

## Gender Harassment

Citron (2009) defines cyber gender harassment as consisting of three core features: its victims are female, the harassment is aimed at women in particular, and the abuse invokes the gender of the targeted individuals in threatening or degrading ways. Gender harassment can be either derogatory or sexual or both; it can be directed toward women as a group or directly at a particular individual. This definition reflects the reality that women face more cyber gender harassment than men (Levmore and Nussbaum 2012; Citron 2014). However, my interviews and observations in the Shenzhen factory indicate that men may face gender harassment on WeChat, even if, typically, less frequently than women do, and, thus, I consider abuse that invokes gender to be gender harassment as well. I found that, regardless of the victim’s gender identity, male employees initiate most cyber gender harassment in WeChat workgroups.

Gender harassment is more common in WeChat groups than in one-to-one communication, according to interviewees. As a result, they often faced textual gender harassment, such as the use of words for female genitalia to refer to women or implying that an error a woman has made is a consequence of her gender. Women report jokes about how being single—and, presumably, sex deprived—explains any responses they made that colleagues dislike and that they were given inappropriate nicknames and remarks about their bodies based on this status. Suggesting that women have used their erotic capital to gain a business advantage such as getting a deal done or receiving an

easy assignment was common as well, part of a general pattern of questioning women's competence. For example, Tao Ranting, a female staff in an event planner company in Nantong City, said that her colleagues would make insulting remarks about her work performance in their WeChat workgroup. She said: “[W]henever I secure a new deal, my male colleagues would make sarcastic comments such as ‘Good-looking makes things easy, right?’ or ‘Seems like honey-trap always works!’”

Graphic gender harassment may consist of sexually explicit and implicit images. Han Meiqian, a female lawyer who works in a law firm in Beijing, said in her interview that she received erotic animated GIFs from colleagues on a daily basis. Another respondent, Yao Li, shared that some of her male colleagues in the company would send pictures of prostitution advertisement cards to their WeChat workgroup: “My colleagues often talk about their after-work life in our WeChat workgroups, sometimes sex-related topics. One time [a male colleague] posted a picture of a prostitution advertisement card in our department’s WeChat workgroup, with a half-naked woman image and the caption, ‘looking for a prostitute?’ on it, joking that ‘good things should be shared with friends.’” Yao Li showed me the screenshot of the WeChat group conversation where some colleagues reacted to the post with comments such as these:

Original poster: “Always share good things with friends.”

Male colleague 1: “Yeah, that’s a good feller!”

Male colleague 2: (Thumbs up emoji.)

Male colleague 3: [Male colleague 4] is the horniest one. @[Male colleague 4]

Male colleague 4: “F\*\*k you” @ [Male colleague 3]. “I never pay for sex.”

The effect was like a riotous party. Whereas a woman’s sexual attractiveness is figured as an indicator of her incompetence as a professional, a man’s sexual attractiveness—such that he would never need to pay for sex—is the occasion for one-upping other men.

Interviewees also reported audio- and video-based gender harassment on WeChat. The Moments (known as “Friends’ Circle”) function is a frequent tool for gender harassment. Similar to Facebook Timeline or Instagram Story, this feature invites comments on words, photos, or videos that individuals have posted. Cheng Xiaonan, an accountant at an accounting firm in Shanghai, said that she had posted a picture of herself and her friends at a bar on the weekend on her WeChat Moments: “When I got home, I saw dozens of messages from my department’s WeChat workgroup that are talking about my WeChat Moments, calling me ‘pussycat,’ referring to my friends as ‘hotties,’ making comments such as ‘I almost got fooled by your righteous face in the office,’ and asking me to wear more slip dresses in the office because [the style] flatters my figure.”

### Unwanted Sexual Attention

In addition to gender-harassing comments in the WeChat workgroup about her post depicting her in a bar on a weekend, Cheng Xiaonan also received private WeChat

messages from her company's associate director, which started with small talk but soon became an explicit proposal for sex. Interviewees said that unwanted sexual attention in WeChat communications often precedes such attention in offline spaces. Would-be harassers may begin grooming their victims with statements like: "I noticed you this afternoon. You looked different," "There must be many admirers falling for you," and "The dress you wore today showed out your body. I like it." Recipients tend not to directly object to such statements, hoping they will not become worse. They do not want to offend the senders, especially if the sender has organizational power over them, and they may not be sure whether this constitutes harassment. However, senders may be testing the waters with comments they see as less directly asking for sex to avoid the humiliation of an outright rejection. The lack of face-to-face contact and context also makes it harder to see the real intentions behind the more ambiguous of these messages. Victims wonder whether the sender is being serious or may have sent the message by accident, intending to send it to someone with whom they have a relationship of some kind. The dual attributes of the relationship between the sender and the recipient—the professional relationship and the WeChat friendship—exert a subtle influence on individuals' perception of the appropriate boundary between them.

Thus, instead of directly expressing their distaste for messages that make them uncomfortable, recipients tend to adopt potentially less confrontational strategies, such as sending back an awkward yet polite emoji or sticker, bringing up other topics as a diversion, or making an excuse to end the conversation. Deflection strategies of this nature are similar to those that employees use in face-to-face conversations, although they do take on different forms. If recipients deflect the WeChat conversation effectively, they may stop additional harassment, but placating senders such that they do not retaliate but still get the message is especially difficult in online chatting. As interviewees explained, they had to be extremely careful about the wording of their responses because of their permanence. The chat box would have the record of what was said in prior conversations anytime the sender re-opened it, while in-person verbal comments can fade in memory. Pan Na, an executive assistant to a program director in an advertisement company in Changsha City, tried this deflection strategy. Her program director had been sending her ambiguous and intrusive WeChat messages for months, and she had tried to placate him until he groped her in his office. She said:

He always sent me WeChat messages after work time, even on weekends. Sometimes the messages were about work, but mostly, they were weird and uncomfortable messages and requests, such as checking where I was, asking me what I was wearing, or even asking me to send a selfie to him. That makes me uncomfortable, but for a time I thought, perhaps, he was just being caring, and being a friend. Also, he was my immediate superior after all and the last thing I wanted to do was to annoy him and make stuff all weird between us. So I just gave him the runaround and got back to work topics. Until he touched my hip and groin in the office. His continuous insult to me was so hard to bear so I ended up leaving the firm.

Harassment online is ubiquitous, but employees cannot completely disconnect from WeChat or unfriend their colleagues and supervisors as they might other online friends.

To do so would not only block work communications but also make it impossible to build *guanxi*. Indeed, employees do not even feel comfortable disconnecting from WeChat or failing to answer supervisors' messages in the evenings or on weekends. Failure to respond to supervisors' WeChat messages or participate in discussion on WeChat groups, even during after-work hours, would constitute irresponsiveness, irresponsibility, and even disobedience. Qi Min, a factory assembly line worker in Shenzhen, said that, with respect to in-person harassment, she "could pretend not to have heard those conversations, walked away, or put on my headphones, to block out those uncomfortable conversations." By contrast, checking group messages on WeChat is compulsory, it was difficult to pretend she did not see them, and she anticipated that in-person interactions might refer to them. Like other victims of WeChat sexual harassment, she suffered in silence, hoping unwanted sexual attention would not escalate to sexual coercion.

### Sexual Coercion

Sexual coercion on WeChat consists of threatening victims with consequences if they do not engage in sexual acts or bribing them to do so. Even more than team building and business drinking occasions, the WeChat platform blurs the personal and professional, and some harassers are more comfortable soliciting sex in this environment than they might be in a less ambiguous context. It is notable that the fact that these messages could be kept as a record on WeChat did not discourage perpetrators from sending coercive sexual requests. This may be because they are taking advantage of the lack of enforcement of policies regarding online interactions. They also may not anticipate recipients reporting them for a variety of reasons. Also, the fact that conversations cannot be overheard on WeChat seems to have made it safer for the would-be harassers to ask for sex since it lessens the prospect of humiliation. At the same time, unlike WeChat users who the victims might know in other contexts or not know at all, colleagues and managers connected by WeChat can readily threaten a decrease in payment for resisting sexual advances or offer job incentives in return for sex and thus increase the chance of receiving sex.

Liu Fan, a former junior sales staff in a clothing shop in Shanghai, found that sexual coercion that occurred on WeChat was as intimidating as offline interactions:

He was the brand ambassador in Shanghai Region. ... Our WeChat conversation began with him asking me about my work situation and giving me some guidance but soon turned to personal topics. He started to compliment my appearance, prying into my relationship status and telling me that he thought something could happen between us. I was not interested, but I didn't want to offend him, so I lied that I had a boyfriend and thanked him for the compliment. But he kept on sending me uncomfortable messages, including topless pictures of himself and sexual invitations, relentlessly, saying that he could promote me to be a senior salesperson if I obeyed him; or else, he said "do yourself a favor and don't be an ungrateful girl that could not take a hint."

The sexual coercion messages were conveyed on the virtual WeChat space, but the practical realization of the threats would happen in the offline work life of the victims. What Liu Fan feared was not only the psychological pressure of the unwelcome sexual invitation from an anonymous man online but also the threats from a male supervisor with whom she would have many in-person interactions at work and whose attitude would significantly affect her career.

WeChat sexual harassment was often used as a grooming technique to precede in-person harassment. Harassers would use work or team connections as a pretext for reaching out to their victims, sending them ambiguous WeChat messages, then escalating to more explicit sexual invitations and demands and then to physical harassment. The online harassment frequently did not stop at this point, as WeChat became a channel for continued harassment, humiliation, and threats. In this respect, online WeChat sexual harassment and in-person harassment have interconnected and mutually reinforced each other, in line with how WeChat requires employees to be always on. WeChat has extended the concept of the workplace, both in time and in space, and, thus, the pervasiveness of workplace sexual harassment. Studies on anonymous cyber harassment suggest that victims find it less threatening than offline sexual harassment (Biber et al. 2002), but WeChat cyber harassment lacks the crucial aspect of being anonymous, and it occurs among people who know each other in real life. Interviewees reported deep trauma, psychological harm, and emotional distress from WeChat harassment. It typically bled into offline spaces as well. Despite the disembodied nature of the interactions, victims of WeChat coercion felt a similar fear as in the offline context. The prospect of a continuation in the offline office environment is sufficient, given the power over them that harassers typically hold.

At the same time, victims of gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention on WeChat tend to find it harder to label their experiences as sexual harassment than those who experience it in person, according to my interviews. They referred to “jokes that have gone too far between friends,” “flirtation and flattery,” and “ill-bred performances” rather than naming their experiences as what they are. In other words, they did not necessarily recognize that such online interactions constitute harassment. Yet most were alarmed by these interactions, not least because they concerned that they might continue in person. The very blurring boundary that encourages harassment complicates victims’ feelings. Victims often find it difficult to recognize them as sexual harassment behaviors. They tell themselves, or are told by others, that harassing behaviors online are less harmful and less serious than in-person harassment. This may be why victims of WeChat sexual harassment tend to endure the harassing messages without taking actions against them for a longer time than in-person harassment.

Once victims perceive the ambiguous interactions in WeChat messages as a practice of sexual harassment, they seem to consider it as, if not more, offensive and inappropriate as the ambiguous comments that happen in offline work settings. As Jodi Biber and colleagues (2002) found in their research regarding the different perceptions of sexual harassment in offline and online settings, misogynist comments, comments about dress, and the use of nicknames were seen as more harassing online than in traditional settings. The researchers argued that this is because the written aspect of these behaviors suggests the perpetrator put some thought into it; seeing their statements in print should have made them ashamed, and they should have been aware

that the statements exist in perpetuity online (Biber et al. 2002). They also argued that the lack of face-to-face contact and context seemingly makes online comments and other harassing acts more inappropriate (Biber et al. 2002). The fact that these messages can be seen on the victims' cellphone seems to amplify the victims' feelings of offensiveness and humiliation. In her interview, Zhu Linlin said that looking at messages from her boss that suggested she wear something cute or sexy rather than a suit that makes her look masculine made her feel like the messages were "repeating themselves, again and again, and I got angrier." The constant connection to WeChat likewise exacerbates these feelings.

WeChat sexual harassment not only causes damage to the harassed individuals, primarily women, but also has a more far-reaching impact on women's participation in the future workforce. Quite distinct from sexual harassment in offline traditional work environments and sexual harassment by anonymous online users, WeChat workplace sexual harassment is a form of online sexual harassment among identifiable work-related people, which makes it a hybrid of some features of both offline and online sexual harassment, thus embodying unique characteristics and leading to different harms. The prevalence of sexual harassment—as a compound of the abuse of organizational power, gender or sex-based discrimination, and sexual desires—on the WeChat work platform indicates that the fight against sexual harassment issues is spilling into the virtual world of work. The trend of work shifting from offline to online as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Donthu and Gustafsson 2020; Kniffin et al. 2021) and explorations of the online world, such as the emergence of the "metaverse" concept in recent years (Clark 2021), only heightens the urgency of addressing sexual harassment in virtual workspaces. WeChat sexual harassment makes the virtual workspaces an uneasy and hostile work environment, much as offline harassment does in offline work environments. Vulnerable groups are discouraged from fully participating in working online. In the new virtual era, this will matter all the more. Unless rules of conduct are updated and fully enforced, women will be at a disadvantage.

## CONCLUSION

Business drinking activities, team-building activities, and WeChat have an unparalleled advantage in facilitating communication and improving work efficiency, but they have provided a new venue for the practice of sexual harassment. They have given harassers new tools and spaces to victimize others. Sexual harassment in these irregular work environments profoundly harm employees yet too often remain overlooked and even trivialized. Such harassment in irregular work-related environments can take the form of texts, voices, videos, and actions, ranging from sexually explicit messages, gender-biased comments, sexual suggestive games, unwanted sexual requests, and sexual assault. Harassment as such may extend to employees' off-work hours and may even follow them home. The prevalence of work-related drinking occasions, team-building activities, and the use of WeChat for work has determined that sexual harassment in these irregular environments is a considerable proportion of workplace sexual harassment problems in general. The normalization and justification of sexually harassing behaviors in these spaces not only constitute distinct harm to



individual employees but also have a broader consequence on the disadvantaged's full and equal participation in the world of work.

Compared with sexual harassment in the conventional workplace, such actions in the abovementioned irregular work environments tend to be more blatant due to the less-structured characteristic of these environments and the absence of legal regulation of interactions in them. At least superficially, sexual desire or needs might be one of the motivations that account for the occurrence of irregular workplace sexual harassing acts. But, at a deeper level, these bullying sexual harassment behaviors are the exercise of organizational power in a vertical hierarchy to consolidate internal oppression and male dominance. Sexual harassment at the business drinking tables and the team-building activities have existed far longer than the WeChat platform, but all three are increasingly significant parts of work life. The harm and negative impact of such harassment are not confined to these atypical environments but reach beyond them, distorting the organizational culture as well as grooming would-be harassers in conventional workplaces. The prevalence and harmful consequences of sexual harassment in these irregular work environments necessitate the inclusion of them into the frame of legal regulation. Leaving them unregulated has not only made them a hotbed of harassment that Chinese employees cannot escape but also training grounds for more general practices of sexualization and harassment.

Interrupting the vicious circle of oppression and sexism will require more than restraining the individual harassers. As this article has argued, Chinese organizations must re-make their corporate cultures. This includes changing the selection and promotion system derived from sexual harassment and the power displays it involves. Unfortunately, re-creating the system will likely take considerable time. It is a complex process that implicates the efforts from different aspects of the culture concept, such as legal reform, corporate and industry policy, education, training, culture promotion, and so on. China is lagging far behind many other nations in this regard. Yet the simple answer is that efforts to hasten the shift from the current organizational culture to a healthy one need to be made stronger. Creating sufficient legal deterrence to make it profitable for employers to shoulder their responsibility for maintaining a secure workplace, for instance, could make a significant difference. The road to reform is clearly filled with obstacles. The fact that it will be a long drawn-out process means that efforts need to begin immediately. This article is not designed to offer detailed legal proposals, and, thus, it ends here. Rather, it has laid out the importance of irregular workplace sexual harassment and the importance of regulating behaviors in these spaces. Future research should lay out legal and organizational reforms. Conceptualizing both the old and new wrongs as workplace harm would be a good place to start.

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