Being student leaders or 'ordinary' students: Children's emotional experiences of relationships with others in a Chinese school

The student leader system is commonly used in Chinese schools. Student leaders are children who are elected by classmates, then assigned by teachers, to be responsible for monitoring classmates' behaviour. Based on the data collected through an intensive ethnographic study in a rural primary boarding school in China in 2016, this article discusses emotional experiences in peer relationships reported by both student leaders and other 'ordinary' students, who were not student leaders. The article argues that China's student leader system is likely to create hierarchical relationships between student leaders and 'ordinary' students, and exposes 'ordinary' students to the potential risk of being exploited by student leaders. The article also argues that because of this student leader system and relevant student evaluation values, student leaders and 'ordinary' students all feel stressed when they are building up and maintaining peer relationships, such as friendships, with each other.

Keywords: Student leaders, Hierarchical Relationships, Chinese primary school, Emotions, Friendship

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Introduction

As argued by James (2013), because children are social actors, who play active roles in the construction and determination of their social lives, their social lives and relationships with others are worthy of study. When studying children's social relationships in childhood, context seems to be an important influential factor (Wyness, 2018). One such context is the school setting. As a place populated by schoolchildren and adult staff, schools can bring together such diversities as age, generation, gender, ethnicity, religion, and culture, as well as socioeconomic differences (Vincent et al., 2018). In everyday school lives, children need simultaneously play different roles, as classmates, friends, and students, in relationships with different others, such as school peers and teachers. Therefore, children's understandings and experiences of interpersonal relationships can be more complex and diverse in school settings than in other contexts.

In school settings, hierarchical relationships exist not only between children and adult teachers but also among children (Hansen, 2015). Various factors could cause hierarchical relationships among children. For example, compared with other 'ordinary' peers, popular children can obtain higher status in the class hierarchy. Such popularity could be shaped by intersectional factors, including such as gender, personality, appearance, socio-economic background, and school performance (Corsaro, 2015).

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Apart from these factors, when studying Chinese children's relationships with peers at school, impacts caused by the student leader (*xuesheng ganbu*[1]) system cannot be ignored. In Chinese educational settings, the student leader system is commonly used as a way to involve children in school's everyday student management to realise their capabilities of 'self-education [*ziwo jiaoyu*], self-administration [*ziwo guanli*], and self-service [*ziwo fuwu*]' (Long, 2008, cited by Hansen, 2015, p.97). Student leaders are a group of children who are elected by classmates, then assigned by teachers as teachers' 'little assistant'. They are responsible for helping teachers to monitor fellow classmates' behaviours and reporting any of their misbehaviours or breaches of rules to teachers, especially when teachers are not present (e.g., noon break) (Wang & Ma, 2019). Since student leaders were constructed as teachers' assistants, representing teachers' authority, children were taught by teachers to show obedience to their peers who were student leaders (Hansen, 2015). Therefore, as argued by many Chinese scholars, since student leaders have power over other 'ordinary' classmates, this student leader system creates hierarchical relationships between children, resulting in risks of power abuse and tension among peers (e.g., Shen, 2012; Chen, 2020).

Based on reflections on the student leader system, good attention has been placed on strategies of improving the level of democracy and equality in the process of appointing student leaders and regulating student leaders' use of power (Chen, 2020). However, in the existing literature, limited resources provide a vivid and detailed

[1] The translation of *ganbu* is a debatable issue. In some relevant work, *ganbu* is translated as 'leader'; but it is translated as 'cadre' in other relevant references (e.g., Hansen, 2015) to exemplify the hierarchical relationship between the student *ganbu* and the ordinary students. Indeed, 'cadre' is the translation that could suggest the historical and political senses behind the original development and application of the student *ganbu* system. However, I decided to translate '*ganbu*' as 'leader' rather than 'carder' in this article because the student *ganbu* system in current Chinese primary schooling remains hierarchical but is less politicised compared with the Soviet Union and Maoist periods (Shen, 2012; Mao, 2018).

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picture of student leaders' and their fellow students' different experiences of peer relationships with each other, caused by hierarchical relationships between them. Also, since experiences in relationships, such as friendships, could be emotionally charged (Greco et al., 2015), I particularly aim to contribute to the knowledge of student leaders' and their fellow students' different experiences in peer relationships from the perspective of emotional burdens carried by them in the process of building up and maintaining friendships.

Data used to develop this article was from an ethnographic study in a rural Chinese primary school in 2016. Although the broad study focused on exploring Chinese children's understandings and experiences of friendships with peers in the context of a rural primary boarding school, rich data about these children's emotionally charged experiences in friendships caused by their different statuses in class hierarchy inspired and contributed to the production of this article. In this article, I have not aimed to generalise Chinese children's emotional experiences in peer relationships caused by the student leader system because the Chinese context is highly diverse while the ethnographic study has a limited sample size. I aim to provide insights into the complexity of children's emotionally charged experiences with peers, including the feelings of being welcomed, marginalised, exploited or estranged, caused by the student leader system from the perspectives of both student leaders and ordinary students.

Student leader system in China

Over the world, involving children in school's daily management is not rare. For example, as the development of child participation movement promoted by the UNCRC, improving children's involvement in issues matter in their lives is upheld in western countries. For example, associations, such as pupil council and student council,

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are commonly used in western countries, such as the UK (Wyness, 2009). China's student leader system is a heritage from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Mao, 2018). Soviet Union schools emphasised both the theories of collective education, which were advocated by Soviet educators, such as Makarenko, and the function of institution (Shen, 2012). In such a context, the student leader system was set up to foster students' sense of collective and obedience, and 'governance is the core work of student leaders' (Shen, 2012, p.22). For example, *ban zhang*, the student leader with the highest status amongst student leaders in the class level, was set up as class teachers' assistant with a responsibility to ensure class's discipline and have the power to punish fellow students, who break the class rules, while fellow students should follow the order given by *ban zhang* (Shen, 2012).

As Shen (2012) and Mao (2018) indicate in their reviews of the historical development of the student leader system in China, at the beginning of importing this student leader system from the Soviet Union in the 20th century, this system had a very strong political sense, embedded with collective values. Student leaders were always 'good students' (*hao xuesheng*) with good academic performance, good family political background, and a good sense of progressive politics, and were normally appointed by teachers directly. Then, with the development of equality and democracy in the education revolution in China, the idea of election was gradually introduced in the process of appointing student leaders. However, as suggested in many studies (e.g., Mao, 2018), a risk of tokenism exists because teachers still play a significant role in such a process and might manipulate elections in some cases. Also, although the political sense attached to the image of 'good students' has been weakened in the current student leader system, the preference of choosing 'good students' to be student leaders is still prominent in current Chinese schools (e.g., Du, 2013; Mao, 2018). For example,

there was a 'common sense' that student leaders should be those with good performance (*biaoxian*) in school. In the Chinese context, performance is a word frequently used to 'compare individual behaviour against the prescribed standards' (Bakken, 2000, p.232). Some scholars have argued that, in Chinese school settings, a child's performance is good or bad depending on whether the child is 'academically competent and achievement-oriented, has high moral character, and is prosocial, group-oriented, and modest' (Xu et al., 2006, p.273). Therefore, currently, student leader positions are still always taken by children with good performance, who are characterised as having 'good grades, disciplined behaviour, and a friendly and respectful attitude towards other students and teachers' (Hansen, 2015, p.59).

Being a student leader is a shared goal of many children and parents, even though some parents are worried that the involvement in class managerial tasks could cost their children's time and energy for studying (e.g., Mao, 2018; Liu, 2020; Gong, 2020). Many parents believe that the experience of being a student leader could support their children to foster different skills, such as communication and leadership skills, and build up a close relationship with teachers (Mao, 2018). The close connection between student leaders and teachers is echoed by Hansen's (2015) interviews with teachers. In such interviews, student leaders are favoured by teachers as 'the most important student' and the 'only real entrance to the lives of students' (Hansen, 2015, p.103). Because of the close connection with teachers, many parents value student leader roles as an opportunity to be favoured by teachers then gain more attention, help, and educational resources from teachers (Mao, 2018). For example, through interviewing children and analysing their diaries, Gao (2012) notices that student leaders always have more opportunities than peers to participate in school events on behalf of the class because they are trusted by teachers as 'good students' to represent the collective

honour of class. Because of these benefits of being a student leader, it is commonly reported that parents encourage and support their children to seek a student leader position, and children view success in student leader campaigns as a cheerful achievement at school to please parents (Mao, 2018).

Although the student leader system is a valued and commonly used practice in Chinese schools, it has attracted a lot of critiques because some scholars have noticed risks caused by this system, such as abuse of power and tension among children (Gao, 2012; Shen, 2012; Duan, 2013; Gong, 2020). As a complex concept, there are different ways to define 'power'; amongst these approaches, Foucault's work on power has a significant impact. Following Foucauldian conception of power, Gallagher (2011) defines power as 'any action or actions which attempt to influence another action or actions' (p.48). Allen (2016) compares different scholars' ways of conceptualizing power, then categorises power as 'power-over', 'power-with', and 'power-to'. She indicates that Foucault's work on power 'presupposes that power is a kind of power-over' (p.2). Allen (2016, p.2) explains that power-over others refers to an exercise of 'getting someone else to do what you want them to do', while one's power-to do something means 'an ability or a capacity to act'. Based on an ethnographic study, Du (2013) notices that student leaders' power to supervise, report, and even publish fellow students provide them 'privilege' in classroom to power over other classmates. Because student leaders' power is commonly unmonitored and unsupervised when teachers are absent, such as in break times, abuse of power often occurs in Chinese classrooms. Through using discourse analysis to analyse conversations between student leaders and fellow students in noon break in primary school classrooms in Guangdong Province in China, Wang and Ma (2019) point out that it is not uncommon to hear fellow students' complaints about student leaders' abuse of power and observe the occurrence of

bullying, cursing and giving commands when student leaders are supervising their fellow peers.

Such unbalanced power and hierarchical relationship between student leaders and fellow students could cause a significant impact on their experiences in peer relationships. For example, since children in middle childhood have an increasing interest in expanding friendship groups and pay increasing attention to acceptance and popularity, they are likely to experience power imbalances in expanded friendship groups. Through working with a group of primary-aged girls in years 2, 4, and 6, George and Browne (2000) notice the existence of hierarchical relationships between children through exploring the structure of their friendship groups, which include 'leader', 'inner circle' and 'periphery'. Since experiences in relationships, such as friendships, can be emotionally charged (Greco et al., 2015), George and Browne (2000) notice that different hierarchical statuses in friendship groups could cause children different emotions. Emotion is relational, and a feeling subject's feels of emotions will 'depend on what the perceived consequences of interactions with others are for the survival, well-being, needs, goals and personal plans of the self' (Stryker, 2004 cited by Bericat, 2016, p. 493). For example, George and Browne (2000) notice that a variety of emotions, such as 'cheer up', 'happy', 'dislike', 'upset', 'feeling of being left out', were mentioned by children to describe their emotional experiences in peer friendship groups because of their different positions in the hierarchy. As suggested by George and Browne's work, compared with peers with higher status in the hierarchy, children from the periphery circle have to bear with heavy emotional burden in interactions between friends. They easily feel unstable and insecure and need to 'vie with each other for the privilege' in friendship groups (George & Browne, 2000, p.293).

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Similar to George and Browne's work, Chinese scholars also notice tension experienced by children in peer relationships caused by hierarchical relationships between student leaders and fellow students (Shen, 2012; Du, 2013; Liu, 2020; Gong, 2020). For example, fellow students commonly report their anger and sadness of being devalued and bullied in interactions with student leaders. Apart from children with lower positions in the hierarchy have to deal with emotional stress, 'powerful' children with higher positions in the hierarchy also have to cope with emotional burdens. For example, in her China-based ethnographic study with rural high school students, Hansen (2015, p.105) notices that student leaders need to bear 'dual pressures' from teachers and peers, particularly friends, in interpersonal interactions at school. Although the tension between student leaders and fellow students is mentioned in existing literature (e.g., Shen, 2012; Du, 2013), there is a lack of vivid picture that details children's thoughts and experiences of the student leader system's impact on their peer relationships. In this article, I aim to use ethnographic data to bring insights into the emotional burdens carried by both student leaders and fellow students in the process of building up and maintaining friendships.

Method

Data used to develop this article was from an intensive ethnographic study from February to July 2016 at a rural boarding primary school (given the pseudonym 'Central Primary School') in Grassland Township (pseudonym) in the middle-western area of China. Although the broad study focused on rural Chinese children's understandings and experiences of friendships as a result of concern about rural children's social and emotional capacities of managing interpersonal relationships with others in today's Chinese society (UNICEF 2019), the student leader system and relevant emotionally

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charged experiences in peer relationships between student leaders and fellow students emerged as significant themes among data. Therefore, although urban and rural schooling division is evident by literature, discussions in this article are developed based on my ethnographic work in the context of a rural boarding school.

Since ethnographic study allows researchers an extended period to stay with research participants to observe what happens, to listen to what is said, and to ask questions (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995), it provided me with deep, thick, vivid, and dynamic descriptions of children's lives. The research setting was chosen after considerations of the researcher's accessibility, such as the linguistic ability to speak local dialect and connections with potential local gatekeepers. Central Primary School is the biggest boarding school in Grassland Township, serving over 300 pupils (more than 200 were resident students during my field time) from nice surrounding villages. The school has classes from Primary Year 1 to 6. Apart from Years 3 and 4, which each has one class of around 40 students, other years all have two classes of around 20 students each.

Through visiting each class to presenting my research plan and seeking consent from teachers, parents, and children, 49 students (aged 11-13 years old at the beginning of my fieldwork) from Primary Year 5's (P5) two classes were finally recruited as the core participants of this research. To immerse deeply and engage in the context, I lived in the school's on-campus teachers' accommodation during ethnographic fieldwork, participating in these P5 children's daily school routines to record how they talk and 'do' interpersonal relationships with others, such as peers, at school. In the ethnographic field, various data collection methods were used, including participant observation, informal conversations, formal interviews, and a collection of relevant documents, such as children's writings about relationships with others at school. After following

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Emerson and colleagues' (2011) ethnographic data management strategies for close reading and coding collected data, the thematic analysis method was employed in the data analysis process to identify, analyse, and report the themes that emerged from the data.

This project's ethical review form was approved by the University of Edinburgh's ethics committee. To contextualise ethical principles in practice, professionals from local family and children services and school teachers were invited to be the backup support and consultancy team. As one of my ethical commitments, in the field, I particularly aimed to adjust the power relations between children and me, an adult researcher, to ensure children were comfortable in front of me. Therefore, in front of children, to help them to distinguish me from their teachers, and the participant observations from surveillance, I managed my role as a researcher, who wanted to learn from them about children's relationships with others, an older sister (*jiejie*), who wanted to befriend them, and an 'unusual adult' (Christensen, 2004), who did not take supervisory role played by the teachers. For example, I insisted that the children call me *jiejie,* hung around, and played with the children; I particularly avoided admonishing them or directing their behaviour. Although it was difficult for children to distinguish my role entirely from the supervisory role played by the teachers at the early stage of fieldwork, ethnography offered me sufficient time to continuously clarify my roles and pass trust tests. For example, I made sure that information received from children, apart from any cases that raised significant concerns about children's safety and wellbeing (e.g., bullying and domestic abuse), was not shared with teachers or other adults. Fortunately, children increasingly tended to accept my roles as a friendly older sister and a curious researcher, rather than a teacher or an adult who were present to spy on them and report their behaviours to their teachers and parents.

However, similarly to Svensson's (2006, p.263) reflection on her fieldwork in China, I experienced ethical challenges in the field because of conflicts between the multiple roles I played in relationships with different groups of people (e.g., children, teachers, and parents). In the field, I was not only an 'unusual adult' in front of children but also a responsible adult in front of teachers and parents. In this case, because I always stayed with children, teachers and parents frequently asked me to evaluate children's performance at school, especially when these adults were not present. In these situations, I always felt dual pressures from teachers/parents and children: I did not want to judge children or report on their misbehaviours, but if I did not, I felt that I might be letting the teachers and parents down. Interestingly, in the field, this stressful experience increased my sensitivity to similar stress that I noticed was experienced by student leaders when they were dealing with 'dual pressures' from teachers and peers, particularly friends (Hansen, 2015, p.105). Therefore, although such experiences brought me stress, the resulting emotional resonance between researchers and research participants contributed to the richness of the research data.

Although ethnographic data collected from a single setting-based work cannot generalise Chinese children's emotional experiences in peer relationships when they are taking different roles in the student leader system, the following sections could provide some insights. Such insights could inspire future studies, such as studies based on different types of schools in urban China and different regions of China.

Befriending powerful friends: student leaders and popularity amongst peers

Like other Chinese schools, Central Primary School used the student leader system as a part of daily student management. At Central Primary School, as noted in conversations with teachers, the student leader system was constructed as a practice

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through which children can participate (*canyu*) in everyday student management and organisation of school events. For example, in several group chats with P5 and 6 teachers about the value of the student leader system, the majority of teachers appreciated the student leader system' various benefits, including 'participating in daily management and helping teachers to know students' behaviours and needs from inside' (Teacher Xu, one P6 Math teacher, female, 40s), 'developing students' sense of responsibility and autonomy' (Teacher Yao, one P6 Class teacher, female, 20s), 'fostering skills to plan and organise events and to communicate with peers' (Teacher Wang, P5 Chinese teacher, male, 50s), etc. In Central Primary School, student leaders were also involved in the decision-making of and organising school events (see also Du, 2013 and Hansen, 2015). For example, in observation, student leaders were the ones to plan school events and organise fellow students to do preparation work, such as Semester's Parents Meeting (e.g., decorating classroom), School's Spring Trip (e.g., grouping classmates and allocating tasks of preparing food for the school trip to different groups), Children's Day show (e.g., collecting classmates' ideas about class's programme, such as dancing or singing, and organising practice after class). However, compared with opportunities to be involved in event planning and organising, governing fellow students on behalf of teachers was still the core responsibility of these student leaders in Central Primary School.

In Central Primary School, the significance of the student leaders' 'function' of governing fellow students was particularly highlighted. This could be a result of a lack of teaching staff and long school time in such rural boarding schools. For example, Central Primary School had around 20 staff, including 5 logistical staff, to look after more than 300 students. The teacher-student ratio was even smaller during weekday evenings because there were only four on-duty teachers and two wardens on the entire

campus to supervise more than 200 residential students. As a consequence, many

teachers reported a lack of sufficient time and energy to simultaneously deal with their

teaching and supervise the children from morning to night. Therefore, teachers highly

valued student leaders' assistance to organise and surprise students in all matters of the

school routine. For example, teachers normally relied on the record provided by student

leaders to judge children's behaviours when the teachers were not present (e.g., evening

self-study time in the classroom and bedtime in dormitory rooms[2]). Since student

leaders were the ones with the power to supervise, record, and report fellow students'

behaviours and relied on by teachers in student management, student leaders happened

to be welcomed by their peers as 'useful' friends at school.

Among these P5 children, friends' 'usefulness' in helping individuals to achieve

personal goals at school was one reason that encouraged them to form friendships with

certain peers (see also Chen et al., 2006). Being a student leader happened to be one of

the shared characteristics of these 'useful' friends in many cases because of their power

in the classroom. In P5 children's talk, the hierarchy between student leaders and

ordinary students was recognised by the children themselves. All P5 children referred to

student leaders' behaviours of supervising, recording, reporting, and even punishing

fellow students' behaviours as '*guan*'. In China, '*guan*' is normally used to describe the

mechanisms by which adults, such as teachers and parents, look after children. It can be

translated as 'supervise', 'monitor' or 'control', to indicate a hierarchical relationship

between two parties having unequal power. Therefore, student leaders were commonly

characterised as the 'powerful' ones, who represent the extension of teachers' authority,

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[2] During my fieldwork time, Central Primary School had a very limited number of dormitory rooms (10 dormitory rooms for more than 200 resident students). Each room has 5 to 6 bunk beds for around 20 students. Same-sex children from the same class were put in the same dormitory room.

in the class hierarchy. For example, in observation, student leaders' means of supervising peers (e.g., patrol and criticism) could suggest that student leaders probably exercised their power over their peers by replicating teachers' ways of supervising students. As noted by Bakken (2000, p.259), Chinese schools always employ some disciplinary techniques of evaluation, such as a points-earning/ranking system, to record, measure and rank children's everyday performance (*biaoxian*): employing plus/add points for good performance, and minus/deduct points for bad performance. Like other Chinese schools, Central Primary School also applied such a points-earning/ranking system. In observations, especially during self-study time when teachers were not present, it was very common to see the on-duty student leader patrolling the classroom. When they noticed peers' misbehaviours such as chatting, playing, or making noise, they would criticize these peers and require them to correct their behaviours; if the peers refused to do so, the student leaders normally recorded it and announced the number of points that had been deducted both from the individual children and from their working groups. Because of such hierarchy between student leaders and fellow students, similarly to other scholars' findings in Chinese schools, both ethnographic observations and conversations with children suggest student leaders' abuse of power in classrooms in Central Primary School. However, most 'ordinary' students showed a submissive and compliant attitude when they were unfairly treated by student leaders (see also Wang and Ma, 2019).

Different reasons can be suggested to explain why most 'ordinary' children were obedient to student leaders. Based on her Chinese high school-based ethnographic work, Hansen (2015) argues that showing obedience to student leaders is a requirement set by teachers. Wang and Ma (2019) add another possibility: that 'ordinary' students choose to be obedient to student leaders because they are afraid of the negative consequences of

rebelling, such as student leaders' revenge. Both these two possibilities are supported by findings that emerged in ethnographic fieldwork in Central Primary School. However, there was another point that emerged from chats with 'ordinary' children: one of the reasons for showing obedience to student leaders' orders and commands was to please student leaders then seek opportunities to befriend these powerful peers because a good relationship with student leaders was beneficial.

One of the benefits these 'ordinary' students expected to gain from good relationships with student leaders was that of not being recorded or reported or having points deducted for their misbehaviours. For these Chinese children, such a benefit was very likely valued because of the fear of being criticised by teachers, a fear which was commonly expressed by all the children. Such fear exists not only because of teachers' authority[3] in the Chinese context but also as a result of negative consequences caused by public criticism in school settings (Schoenhals, 2016). In the field, in each morning's class meeting, the class teacher checked the on-duty student leader's record for the previous day, especially during evening self-study time. If some children's misbehaviours were recorded, it was very likely that the class teacher would criticise them in class in front of the other classmates. In such public criticism, as noticed by Schoenhals (2016, p.111) as well, I frequently witnessed children who had misbehaved being asked to stand throughout the class. This was a deliberate means of causing misbehaving students to lose face by visually separating them from classmates (Schoenhals, 2016, p.111) and was applied as a way of punishing children for

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[3] In the Chinese context, because of Confucian virtues, teachers can be regarded as having authority and status equal to that of parents (Bi and Fang, 2020), which even strengths the hieratical power relation between students and teachers. For example, *'yiri weishi, zhongshen weifu'* is a common saying in China, which literally could be translated as 'he who teaches me for one day is my father for life' (Yau, 2015, cited by Bi and Fang, 2020, p.180)

misbehaving. If a child repeatedly misbehaved, the teacher would report his/her bad performance to the parents, which would most likely lead to further criticism from them (see also Wang & Ma, 2019).

'Shameful' (*diuren*) was the most frequently used term to describe a child's feelings when being criticized by teachers. The 'shameful' feeling might be closely linked to the idea of '*mianzi*' (face) in the Chinese context. '*Mianzi*' in Chinese refers to an individual's social standing and position as recognised by others, which could influence the other parties' attitudes towards this individual in social interactions (Buckley et al., 2006). In an ethnographic study that included an exploration of the relationship between teachers' criticism (*piping*) of students and students' feeling of losing face (*diu mianzi*) in a Chinese school setting, Schoenhals (2016) argues that a high level of sensitivity is assigned to '*mianzi*' (face) in Chinese schools. He explains that 'criticism of a student in front of other students makes a student feel a loss of face, a very serious emotional injury in China' because it undermines a person's dignity and wishes to be respected in his or her community, such as family (Schoenhals, 2016, pp.40-41). This is emotional reaction might be rooted in the collective-oriented Chinese family relationship. In the Chinese context, children's individual failures shame both themselves and their parents because of a trend of praising parents for children's success and blaming parents for the failures of their children (Schoenhals, 2016; Author, 2020). In this case, Chinese children are principled that 'individual development and performance are to achieve the success of the family' (Huang & Gove, 2015, p.44) because their performances represent the family's collective face. Therefore, in observation, losing of face for the parents was commonly used by teachers to criticise a child's bad performance at school, such as failure in a major test or misbehaviour (see also Author, 2020).

Apart from the risk of losing face, being reported to teachers increases the risk of being marginalised and excluded by peers. The points-earning/ranking system was closely linked with the group-based work model applied at Central Primary School. To promote the idea of the collective (*jiti*) (Hansen, 2015), children are always divided into different working groups. Children in the same working group were required to cooperate as units, working and assuming responsibilities together in most school tasks. Thus, each working group member's performance had a significant influence on the group's collective performance. For example, following teachers' criticism, there was always a deduction of points not only in the child's individual account but also in his/her working group's account. The points earned by each working group were compared at the end of every month; the working group with the highest points was awarded the title of 'outstanding working group'. Therefore, a child's performance was not only a meaningful personal matter but also affected his or her working group's chances of success. In this case, it was not rare to find in observations that a child's misbehaviours that caused deduction of points in his/her working group's account always annoyed his/her groupmates and were marginalised and excluded within the group. For example, in observation, there were several times that some children approached class teachers to claim their group's request of removing some 'naughty' groupmates from their groups. Moreover, significant adults', such as teachers and parents, impact on children's choices of friends also resulted in some children's experiences of exclusion among peers. Children who were always criticised by teachers in class in front of other peers were likely to be labelled 'bad students'. 'Bad students' were not identified by significant adults (e.g., teachers and parents) as 'proper' ones for children to befriend (Author, 2020). These significant adults' highlight the importance of befriending 'good' friends, such as student leaders (Author, 2020). In this case, to please these significant adults,

the majority of children were keen to make friends or at least keep on good terms with student leaders.

In sum, because good relationships with student leaders could be beneficial, these student leaders were generally popular amongst their peers. As a result, in the field, student leaders were always observed as the ones who were surrounded by peers. However, as will be discussed in the next session, because of the unbalanced power relations between student leaders and 'ordinary' students, together with student leaders' responsibilities to teachers and class's collective good, conversations with children suggest that such a student leader system has caused both student leaders and 'ordinary' students to struggle in relationships with peers.

Student leaders' and 'ordinary' students' struggles in friendships with peers

As argued by James (2013), children can practise self-reflection and recognise connectedness between themselves and others in their everyday personal lives. Both observations and conversations with children suggest that these student leaders were aware of their popularity amongst peers. Consequently, some student leaders also recognise their 'privilege' of being able to select friends from a large group of peers, all of whom want to befriend them. Then, it was noticed in the field that some of these 'powerful' children seemed to take advantage of other peers' strong willingness to befriend them by ordering them about. In such a case, in both narratives and observations, it was common to notice that children with lower status in the class hierarchy always needed to please their 'powerful' and 'useful' friends by showing obedience when asked to do them favours. For instance, the most effective way to befriend student leaders was to 'do what they said' (Interview, 25th May 2016). However, doing the favours asked of them by these student leaders could go against

fellow students' own interests by requiring them to invest their own time and property in the process. Wei, a P5 boy, for example, reported being asked by student leaders to help them make papercraft for the Art class:

> … They asked me to help them to make the pineapple. I then helped them to make the pineapple, and it took me quite a few days. […] I did not want to make the pineapple papercraft. […] It [student leaders asked Wei to make papercraft for them] is because they did not want to buy colourful papers. Then I saved my pocket money. I saved around 50 Chinese yuan; it was saved over two weeks; I bought many colourful papers for them. (Interview, 25th May 2016)

Apart from this, in observations, some fellow students were seen to reluctantly stop playing a game when asked by some student leaders to take on the tasks these student leaders did not like to do, such as mopping the floor and cleaning the rubbish bins. Although these fellow students sometimes were not happy to do such favours, they still agreed to do them almost every time. They explained that the student leaders would be annoyed if they refused and that, if they refused often, the student leaders would replace them by befriending others. They did not want to lose the benefits of friendship with these powerful student leaders, as discussed in the previous session. For them, the consequence of losing such 'useful' friendships could threaten the quality of their school experiences. Apart from this fear of losing such 'useful' friendships, a small group of children added that they felt a sense of 'indebtedness' to their powerful student leader friends. They explained their decisions to 'do what they [powerful student leader friends] said' as a way of returning favours' (*renqing*) (e.g., showing 'mercy' in peer supervision, by not reporting their misdeeds to teachers). Although the rule of giving and returning favours helps to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships in the Chinese context (Qi, 2013), the sense of 'indebtedness' to the person who gives favours (Qi, 2013, p.314) can sometimes cause difficulties if the one who is expected to return favours to the assisting person does not feel free to refuse to sacrifice his/her own interest by providing such paybacks, due to the assisting person's power over him/her.

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In this case, many fellow students commonly expressed negative emotions, such as feeling unhappy, anxious, stressed, and reluctant, when they were exploited by student leaders.

Apart from these 'ordinary' students, the student leaders themselves, in conversations with them, frequently reported stressful struggles in peer relationships, especially experiences of friends' estrangement, caused by their duties as student leaders. Student leaders, as a group of children whose job was to act as teachers' assistants in the daily management of the class and peer supervisors of fellow students, were required to give priority to the class's collective good and service to teachers and other classmates (see also Hansen, 2015). As several student leaders complained, this position, in some cases, threatened their relationships with friends. For example, Qian, a core P5 student leader, cried in my presence a couple of times when complaining about the stress she experienced after becoming a core student leader. She said gloomily:

> […] I know many people complain that I am bossy and rude when supervising people, but I do not want to be like this, I was not like this before! I just have to be like this because I have to do the job as the student leader to supervise people. They would not listen to me, especially the naughty boys, if I was a soft girl. (Field note, 21st June 2016)

When performing her responsibility of supervising fellow students for the class's collective performance, Qian was annoyed by peers' complaints that she was 'bossy and rude' during peer supervision. Such peer impressions hampered her peer relationships, including friendships. For example, according to conversations with a couple of girls who had previously been very close friends with Qian, it seems that Qian experienced friends' estrangement after being appointed a core student leader. According to these girls, since Qian had become more and more aggressive and bossy, they felt uncomfortable around her.

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Besides Qian, Wenhua, another P5 girl student leader, blamed the negative influence on her heavy workload as a student leader which reduced the time that she had for playing with friends. Wenhua complained that performing her student leader duties cost her a lot of after-class time, leaving her with too little time to play with her ex-best friend Qinyang. Therefore, Qinyang spent more time playing with Yulian, with whom she developed an intimate friendship that threatened her friendship with Wenhua (Field note, 30th May 2016). Wenhua's opinion was shared by other children, such as Yuan, a P5 girl:

> Student leaders play with student leaders. It is very difficult for a normal person to play with these leaders…[because] being a student leader means extra tasks from teachers, which would occupy the time that should be used to stay with friends. Without putting enough time into friendships, friends would feel estranged, and friendship would then become less close. (31st May 2016)

Play, as a central part of children's worlds, occupies a significant space in their daily lives (Smith, 2009). Almost all of these P5 children repeatedly highlighted that the length of time children spend playing together matters in intimate friendships. For them, intimate friends should always 'stick together' (e.g., 'choose and join in games together' or 'bring friends when receiving a game invitation' as some children put it). Therefore, a lack of playtime can threaten these friendships, so that the position of student leader carries the risk of limiting a child's time spent with friends, especially those who are not student leaders themselves.

Even though Wenhua and Qian experienced negative effects on their own friendships caused by their collective responsibilities as student leaders, everyday observation indicated that they both still spent considerable time and effort serving the collective good in that role. One reason that emerged from these two girl student leaders' words was a fear of '*piping*' (criticism), a negative consequence of failing to do a good job. In Wenhua's words, failure to do a good job will pose the risk of 'being

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criticised (*piping*) [by teachers and classmates] as incompetent student leader then gets

dismissed' (Field note, 30th May 2016). Qian also emotionally mentioned the

embarrassment of '*piping*' (criticism) by using the below experience of being criticised

by teachers for other children's misdeeds.

> Sometimes, some naughty students' misdeeds during evening self-study are recorded by on-duty teachers. Then, the class teacher also 'piping' (criticised) me in class the next day because she thought I did not do my job well to protect our classroom from losing points… I used to be asked to stand in the back of the classroom with the naughty boys in the following day's morning class meeting after their misbehaviours were warned by the on-duty teacher in the past night. (Field note, 14th March 2016)

In China's Confucian-collectivist context, people who fail to fulfil their

obligations to the collective are viewed as shameful and guilty (Bedford & Hwang,

2003). Being criticised for self's failure to obligations to the collective in front of other

students could produce student leaders the emotional injury of losing face (*mianzi*). As

argued by Schoenhals (2016, p.198), 'those of higher status are more vulnerable to

losing face and feeling shame'. Student leaders, as the ones with higher status among

peers in the class hierarchy, might feel an even stronger emotional impact than other

peers when experiencing public criticism at school. Therefore, to avoid the risk of

losing face through public criticism, some student leaders, such as Qian and Wenhua,

had to prioritise the performance of their duties to the 'collective' over individual

friendships.

Furthermore, although some of these student leaders said on occasion that they

had considered resigning when experiencing difficulties in the process of shouldering

their responsibilities as student leaders, none of them resigned or refused new

appointments during the fieldwork time. As explained by them in chats, treasuring the

honour of being chosen as a student leader was one of the key reasons for continuing to

be a student leader. Since the principle of choosing children with good performance at

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school as student leaders was a 'common sense' shared by children, teachers, and parents, being nominated and appointed as a student leader was appreciated and valued as a great honour. Such hounour not only suggested that they were trusted by teachers as teachers' 'little assistants' but also proved that their good performance at school was acknowledged by both peers and teachers. Moreover, as emerged in conversations with both children and their parents in the field, being a student leader was an achievement that made parents proud. Similarly to the previous discussion about the Chinese family's collective face (Huang & Gove, 2015; Schoenhals, 2016), good performance is understood as a behaviour that will bring glory for the parents. Therefore, in the field, even when these student leaders were plagued by stress caused by the student leader role, they still chose to bear such stress rather than refuse or resign from appointments, because they valued this honour.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article unpacked how deeply student leaders were involved in the processes of supervising their peers' school performance as 'teachers' little assistants'. Through this discussion, the article suggested that, because of this student leader system, hierarchical imbalance commonly existed among children's interpersonal relationships with peers. From the perspective of ordinary students, befriending student leaders was a useful way of improving their own school experiences (e.g., by begging for mercy in peer supervision). However, the hierarchical imbalance between student leaders and ordinary students created a risk that children with lower status in such peer relationships might face negative experiences of being exploited in the process of establishing and maintaining friendships with their 'powerful' and 'useful' friends. From the perspective of student leaders, being in that position was not always a joyful experience. Although

their position as student leaders gave them power over other peers, it also gave them burdensome responsibilities. In some cases, student leader roles caused crises in their interpersonal relationship with peers.

The findings of this study also raise some concerns about the student leader system. As claimed by teachers, the student leader system was appreciated by teachers in Central Primary School because of its benefits of encouraging children's participation in the school's daily student management, event planning, and organising. Improving children's capabilities and involvement of self-education, self-administration, and self-service through the student leader system (Long, 2008, cited by Hansen, 2015, p.97) is meaningful in rural boarding schools, such as Central Primary School, because of the small teacher-student ratio. However, such a system still needs to be improved from the perspective of promoting children's right to participation as laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). Children's right to participation entails an appreciation of every child's right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them. However, the student leader system fails to offer all children equal opportunities to become student leaders. Because of the common sense' of choosing students with good school performance as student leaders, such system provides more opportunities for the high-achieving children while denies some low-achieving children's opportunity to make their 'voices' heard (see also Gao, 2012). Also, in Central Primary School, the main task of student leaders was to implement the school's rules and conduct surveillance on behalf of the teachers, rather than helping themselves and fellow peers to freely express their 'own views and not the views of others' (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, p.10). Therefore, the student leader system may in fact be a way of extending adult power and surveillance, and getting children to comply through emotional pressures, rather than a platform that

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helps children enter into dialogue with the school's administration as spokespersons for

the children themselves, representing their needs and feelings at school.

Moreover, this article suggested that the student leader system is suspected of

undermining children's wellbeing in peer relationships at school, because of its negative

consequence of strengthening a hierarchical relationship between student leaders and

their fellow students. This hierarchical arrangement, in turn, could give rise to both

student leaders' and other fellow students' negative experiences in peer relationships

(e.g., negative feelings of being marginalised, exploited, and estranged), which are

likely to undermine their wellbeing at school. Therefore, this research has pointed out

the need to be aware of the risky consequences for the wellbeing at school of student

leaders and fellow students when the student leader system is applied within a school's

organizational and management mechanisms.

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