[Who are "good" friends? Chinese parents' influences on children's friend selection]

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ABSTRACT:

Friendships, an important form of people's everyday relationships with others, have been studied by many scholars from different disciplines (Allan and Adams, 2007). However, there is limited research on friendship in the context of childhood, particularly that of Chinese rural children. This article is presents findings from an in-depth study on Chinese children's understandings and experiences of friendships with peers in the context of a rural primary boarding school. Data for this research were collected through an intensive 5-month study, using an ethnographic approach, in a rural primary boarding school (given the pseudonym "Central Primary School") in the western area of China in 2016. This article discusses parents' influences on children's selection of friends, particularly their "good" friends, and their understandings of the functions of making friends in the context of rural China. It unpacks parents' interventions on children's friendships by discussing the moralized hierarchical relationship between children and their parents - children are expected to show obedience to parents. Then, it argues that the Confucian-collectivist values construct a relationship between a child's individual achievement and their family's collective good, which makes friendship not only an individual issue but a collective one too.

KEYWORDS:

(Please supply up to 6 keywords for your Chapter)

1. Friendship
2. Parents
3. Children
4. "Good" friend
5. Friend selection
6. Chinese schooling

Main Body:

Introduction

Friendship, an important form of interpersonal relationship across the life-span, has been explored by many scholars from different disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, sociology and anthropology (e.g., Allan, 1979; Badhwar, 1993; Bell and Coleman, 1999; Hartup and Rubin, 2013). As the beginning of the life-span, childhood is seen as an essential context in which to situate friendship research. However, there are few sociological studies which have located children's friendship in the context of China's rural school setting. This research sought to address this gap. Data were collected during an intensive five-month period of ethnographic field work in Central Primary School, a primary rural boarding school in the western area of Hubei Province, China. The aim of the study was to explore a group of Primary Year 5 children's understandings and experiences of friendships at school. One of the central findings, which has been highlighted by other scholars researching other contexts (e.g., Rubin et al., 2008; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008), was that parents could significantly influence children's friendship experiences. Therefore, this chapter focuses on discussing parents' influences on these Chinese pupils' friend-making at school, particular "good" friends, and their understandings of the functions of making friends.

This chapter includes three sections. It firstly reviews literature about parents' influences on children's friendships. Then, it introduces the methods used by this research. The finding section starts with a discussion about how Chinese parents draw on the wider Confucian virtues and collectivist norms to construct "good" friends when educating their children about the rule of making friends at school. Then, it explores how this way of constructing "good" friends shape their children's friendship experiences at school.

The role of parents in children's friendship experiences

When studying friendship, sociologists tend to understand "friendship" in its broader sociocultural context. They highlight the complexity and uncertainty of the meanings of "friendship" in different people's understandings in various contexts. Among the four levels of context suggested by Adams and Allan (1998), the network level is included as an important level of context. The network level of context refers to kinship, family and other patterns of network, as well as particular personal relationships with specific embodied obligations and properties (Adams and Allan, 1998:6). It highlights that the existing network can shape people's friendship experiences. Parents' influences on children's friendship experiences have been discussed in some Western-based studies. For example,

Rubin and colleagues (1984:224) unpack parents' five different modes of influences on children's friendships, which are 'setting the stage', 'arranging social contacts', 'coaching', 'providing models of social relationships' and 'providing home base'. Cui and colleagues (2002) explore how American parents' hostile parental behaviours toward their children influence their children's quality of close friendships. Smith and colleuages (2015) discuss how European parents influence their children's attitude toward "out-group" peers then shape the friendships between native and immigrant adolescents. In general, these studies suggest that, through indirect socialization and direct involvement (Updegraff et al., 2001), parents can shape their children's understandings of friendships and behaviours of coping with friends in daily interactions.

Currently, in comparison to Western-based studies, there are few sociological studies about Chinese parents' influences on children's friendships. However, it is a topic deserves to be explored, especially considering the Confucian moral virtue that requires children's obedience in relationships with parents. There are unbalanced power relations between children and adults in many cultures, making children's obedience to adult authority (e.g., teachers at school and parents at home) a common theme (Mayall, 2001; Montandon, 2001). In the Chinese context the importance of offering respect, compliance and obedience to parents (e.g. Wang and Mao, 1996; Kwan, 2000) is further strengthened by the Confucian-collectivist moral system. As many scholars (and Chinese people themselves) have stated, China is commonly viewed as a country with collectivist values (e.g. Yan, 2005, 2010; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008; Gummerum and Keller, 2008) and Confucian culture (e.g., Wang and Mao, 1996; Gu, 2006; Yu, 2008; Wang, 2011; Adler, 2011). These collectivist values and Confucian cultural features have a significant influence on Chinese interpersonal relationships (Triandis, 1995; Chow et al., 2000; Lun, 2012; Zhang and Tian, 2014), including Chinese children's relationships with significant others in their everyday lives, such as peer friends and parents (e.g., Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008).

In China's national moral education scheme, filial piety (*xiaoshun*) is one of the core virtues, which emphasises on children's 'obligations, respect, obedience, and duty to parents' (Kwan, 2000:24). In contemporary Chinese studies, there is an argument that marketization challenges Chinese people's traditional Confucian virtues within the family, such as filial piety (e.g., Yan, 2011). Despite these changes, this virtue still plays an important role in Chinese society. For example, in a series of regulations for primary and middle school students, such as "Regulations for primary and middle school students" (*zhongxiao xuesheng shouze*), issued by the State Education Commission of the People's Republic of China, the key rules for getting along with significant others – parents, teachers and classmates – remain largely unchanged. "Filial piety in relationship with parents" (*xiaoshun fumu*) is always included. Through reviewing scholars' comprehensive discussions about the aspects of

Chinese Filial piety (e.g., Kwan, 2000), it suggests that, behind this virtue of filial piety is a Confucian idea that 'family members are conceptualized as one body' (Kwan, 2000:24). The following finding section discusses how the Chinese parent-children relationship makes friend selection as a collective affair that matters to not only children themselves but also their parents. It will also discuss how does the idea that children need to show obedience to parents cause children struggles when their ways of constructing "good" friends are different from that of their parents.

Methods

Data used in this chapter were collected via an intensive five-month study, which used an ethnographic approach. Ethnography as a particular method (or set of methods) offers researchers immersive opportunities to participant in researched people's 'daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:1). Ethnography is chosen as the most appropriate approach for this children's friendship study because of two reasons. Firstly, ethnography as an advanced research approach that could provide my research questions with in-depth, detailed and immersive answers (Greener, 2011). The written product of ethnographic work usually aims to achieve a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973). Ethnography's thick descriptions contribute not only to describing how children think about friendship and how they practise friendship in their daily interpersonal interactions, but also to contextualizing these descriptions in the particular research context and deriving rich interpretations to enable "thick" research findings (Ponterotto, 2006). Secondly, when studying children's experiences, ethnographic approach can provide me, an adult researcher, an opportunity to work with children and learn from children (Wyness, 2012), with a view of children's competence at interpreting their distinctive cultures and lives in their social world as social actors (James, 2001; Gallagher, 2009b).

The fieldwork site was chosen in Central Primary School, Grassland Township[1], Hubei Province because of three reasons. Firstly, Chinese dialects are 'not mutually intelligible' and consequently people from different areas of China could find each other's dialects 'incomprehensible' (Ramsey, 1989:6). My pilot experiences suggest that the children and teachers normally spoke Mandarin in class but dialects outside of class. Therefore, to ensure the quality of communication and the process of exploring discourse and the constructions of Chinese social reality, my linguistic competence of local dialect was the first consideration (Thøgersen, 2006; Sæther, 2006). Secondly, in China's tightly controlled and politicalized educational system (Li, 1990; Li et al., 2004), the possibility of gaining official permission (Heimer and Thøgersen, 2006) to enter and stay in a school was considered. Thirdly,

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[1] These research field's names have been anonymized.

as Bryman emphasizes (2012:435), researchers need to offer something in return to create a sense that they are trustworthy. Therefore, the third criterion of the ideal fieldwork site was that I should have the agreement of the school authorities that whatever I offered in return should not invite restrictions on my data collection plans or on my relationships with the children. For example, I could not offer a contribution through playing a "teacher" role because of its ethical risk of blurring the boundaries between me and their teachers and between my research and their compulsory school work.

The study being child-centred, 49 Primary Year 5 (P5) children from two classrooms, aged 11-13 at the beginning of my fieldwork, were the core research participants. Since parents and teachers are significant adults in the study of children's everyday relationships with others (Davies, 2015), apart from children I also closely engaged with these child participants' teachers at school and seized opportunities to build up conversations with several children's parents/grandparents in the field. Because of my limited fieldwork time scale (5 months) approved by my funder, to ensure the intensity and quality of collected data, this research adopted several data collection methods. They include participant observation and ethnographic conversations as the main methods, supplemented with formal interviews (35 children with 30- to 40- minutes individual/paired semi-structured interviews), a participatory method called the "diary programme" [2] (in which 36 children participated), and collection of texts and documents (e.g., school decorations/displays, textbooks, and children's school work). These ethnographic data were managed and analysed both in and after leaving the field (Emerson et al., 2011). Thematic analysis and in-process analytic writing (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005) supported me to structure data into research output.

Given the importance of ethics in studies with children (Gallagher, 2009a) and the sensitivity of talking about emotionally charged friendship experiences (Greco et al., 2015), ethical considerations (e.g., informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and knowledge exchange) have been carefully applied as an essential part throughout the research process. I particularly treated the informed consent as an ongoing process throughout the entire fieldwork rather than a one-off task (Gallagher, 2009a). During such process, I continuously highlighted to child participants that my research was not a school work and they were free to withdraw from and return to the research at any time. To decrease the

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[2] In the project, the diary programme was designed to respond to the possibility of some children finding it stressful to express themselves in a face-to-face conversations with me, an adult researcher (see also Qvortrup, 1994; Brannen and O'Brien, 1995), but wishing to seek a private space to share their thoughts about friends and friendship, unheard by others. Children were encouraged to record their thoughts and experiences of friendships as well as their questions about me or about this project that they wanted to share with me privately. They were invited to hand their notebooks to me at any time they wished, whereupon, I read them and wrote back to them in their notebooks.

unbalanced power relationship between child participants and me, I tried to play a role as an "unusual adult" (Christensen, 2004). As an unusual adult, I was keen to chat, sit down and play with the children, and avoided admonishing or directing the children's behaviours. I also made sure that information received from children did not get back to their teachers. During my ongoing access (Bryman, 2012:439) to the children, keeping their answers and behaviours confidential helped me to pass certain trust tests (Van Maanen, 1991) and showed the children that I was not a spy sent by their teachers or parents. Through playing this role I successfully gained some insights into these children's world, collecting rich data about their thoughts and experiences.

"Making more friends, making "good" friends": following parents' education when making friends

China's top-down, centralized education system, national moral education scheme and its relevant materials (e.g., course design, regulations and individual models) serve as guidelines and directives for China's numerous schools (Yu, 2008:125). Central Primary School, like other Chinese schools, embodies Confucian virtues in its everyday moral education. It not only has a formal moral education course called Morality and Society (*pingde yu shehui*), and a series of reading books on morality (*liyi duben*), but also represents Confucian virtues in the school's decorations. Decorations on the walls of the central stairwell in the main teaching building include one copy of the "Regulations for primary and middle school students" (*zhongxiao xuesheng shouze*), and seven pictures displaying quotations on topics such as "hardworking study" and "relationships with parents, teachers and others" from the "*Di Zi Gui*" and the "*Sanzi Jing*", two Confucian classics of child education detail the standards of the good student and the good child. One of the quotations is '*fumu hu, ying wuhuan; fumu ming, xing wulan; fumu jiao, xu jingting, fumu ze, xu shuncheng*' from the "*Di Zi Gui*". It can be translated literally as: when parents call you, you need to respond without delay; when parents ask you to do something, you need to act without indolence; when parents teach you, you must listen and take it in; when parents blame you, you must be docile. It is an example that summarizes children's expected attitude towards parents.

Apart from the school decorations, in everyday conversations between children and parents/teachers, the phrase *tinghua* (literally translated as "listen talks": that is, taking in what their parents/teachers say) is always found within parents' and teachers' requirements for children. When a child challenges parents and teachers by arguing, this behaviour is criticized as *dingzui* (literally translated as "talk back"); when a child does not follow what a parent or teacher has said, he/she will be blamed for *bu tinghua* ("not listen talks"). Both *dingzui* and *bu tinghua* are viewed as disobedient and non-docile behaviours, which were not what a "good" child should do to their parents, because they disrupt the

harmony in relationships between children and parents (see also Lau, 1996; Gao, 1996, 1998; Tardif and Wan, 2001).

Therefore, in the field, one of the ways most frequently applied by children to show their obedience to parents was to quote what parents had said to them as reasons for their own behaviours. Among these "quotes", the rule of "making more friends, making "good" friends" was commonly referenced by children as the rule of making friends taught by their parents. When placing such friendship education in the school context, since classmates are the most important group of peers in children's school lives (see previous sections and also Corsaro, 2003; Hadley, 2003), in most cases, classmates were viewed as the children's potential friends. Therefore, both in children's narratives and from my observations, "making more friends" was commonly rephrased and explained by parents as meaning: "befriend as many classmates as you can maintain harmonious and friendly relationships with". To grasp the meaning of "making 'good' friends", the first step is to understand what these parents mean by "good" friends.

As reported by many P5 children, a Chinese idiom – "*jin zhu zhe chi, jin mo zhe hei*" (when you touch red, you become red; when you touch black, you become black) – was always highlighted by their parents when educated them the importance of making "good" friends. In this context, this idiom means that "a 'good' friend will make you good, while a 'bad' friend will make you bad". It suggests an awareness of peer friends' significant influence on the individual's behaviour (see also Adler and Adler, 1998; Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011; Brechwald and Prinstein, 2011; Corsaro, 2015). In this case, all of the P5 children of migrant parents mentioned that when their migrant parents phoned them to check on their school lives, their parents always asked how they were getting along with their classmates and encouraged them to befriend "good" ones and stay away from "bad" ones. According to these children, their parents always construct a "good" friend as one with good *biaoxian* (performance) at school. In the Chinese context, *biaoxian* means '"to show, display, manifest, express", or even "show off",' which is used to 'check each individual's attitude towards the prescribed norms', and to 'compare individual behaviour against the prescribed standards' (Bakken, 2000:232). Therefore, at school, a Chinese child's *biaoxian* is good or bad depending on whether or not his/her attitudes and behaviours accord with the prescribed norms and standards in the Chinese school environment. Xu and colleagues (2006:273) argue that:

> Chinese school environments remain orderly and authoritarian, and the ideal
> Chinese child is still described as one who is academically competent and

achievement-oriented, has high moral character, and is prosocial, group-oriented, and modest.

Therefore, as commonly reported by children that, , in their parents' eyes, "good" classmates always meant the high-achieving ones with good grades and disciplined behaviour; while the "bad" classmates commonly meant those who were labelled "*bu tinghua*" ("not listen [to parents' and teachers'] talks"), "naughty trouble-makers", and "low-achieving and lazy in studying". Similar ways of evaluating their children's friends were cross-checked in my conversations with several parents and grandparents of these P5 children.

According to conversations with several parents, it seems that they viewed teaching children the rules of making friends as a contextual choice, to prepare children to enter China's 'relation-centered world' (Tsui and Farh, 1997:61). As keystones of Chinese society, traditional Confucianism and political ideology of collectivism have suggested a collective orientation in Chinese people's understanding of the relationship between "self" and "others" (Yao and Yao, 2000; Yan, 2005; Yu, 2008; Wang, 2011; Wu, 2014). In this Confucian-collectivist context 'a dependency of one on the other' (Barbalet, 2014:187) is highlighted. As argued by some scholars, in comparison to the West, Chinese people show 'a much stronger tendency to divide people into categories and treat them accordingly […] depending on one's relationship to them' (Tsui and Farh, 1997:61). For example, people can feel a moral obligation and interpersonal responsibilities to other in-group members (Stevenson et al., 1990; Beford and Hwang, 2003; Keller, 2006; Gummerum and Keller, 2008). Therefore, 'Chinese may go beyond their means to help an insider but an outsider has to follow the rules' (Gao, 1998:165). In this 'relation-centered' Chinese context, a Chinese idiom "*zaijia kao fumu, chumen kao pengyou*" (relying on parents at home, but relying on friends outside the home) and similar expressions (e.g., 'having more friends means having more options in the future') were commonly mentioned by several P5 children's parents in our conversations as an emphasis on the necessity of having friends. For them, building up a good number of friendships could benefit a person's access to more social resources in China's 'relation-centered' context. In this case, they saw positive relationships with others as promoting individual success (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008:193). Thus, from their perspective, it was important for a child to make many friends. However, merely having the ability to make many friends is not enough. As a P5 child's parent added, 'Friends must not be chosen blindly' (Field note, 28th June 2016). From these significant adults' perspective, there was a consensus that, apart from the ability to make many friends, the ability of making "good" friends, who have the potential to exert positive influences on one's development, is also crucial. Therefore, it is clear that, through educating children to follow the rule of "making more friends, making "good" friends", these parents express their

expectations of helping children to gain not only harmonious relationships with most classmates but also useful support for personal development.

Children's choice of friends as a collective issue in family

Although the individual-oriented benefit to children's relationships with others at school and future development was prominent in parents' expectations, when parents highlighted to children the importance of following this rule for making friends, it seems that children's friend selection was constructed as a choice that not only matters to children themselves but also to parents. In the field, it was common for children's parents to use different ways of "investigating" their children's friend selections at school (e.g., by phoning teachers, asking me about it when encountering me in town, or enquiring of children's classmates). The reason, as it emerged from conversations with several P5 children's parents, was that parents commonly considered the consequences of friend selection as a long-term chain reaction. A concern frequently expressed by them was that bad friends would have a negative influence on academic performance; without a good academic performance, opportunities to enter a good university, find a good job and offer the next generation a better environment to grow up in were likely to be diminished. In this case, from these parents' perspective, as one P5 child's mother explained, 'I definitely encourage her to befriend many classmates at school. […] However, having a bad friend is worse than having no friend' (Field note, June 2016). Parents' strong concern over possible adverse consequences for their children's personal development might be rooted in the obligation-based and collective-oriented Chinese family relationship.

In contemporary Chinese studies, there is an argument that marketization challenges Chinese people's traditional Confucian and collective-oriented values within the family, such as filial piety (e.g., Yan, 2011). However, as noticed in this project as well as in other Chinese based studies, 'family obligation remains strong' (Qi, 2016:49) in China. Parents are likely to show altruistic motives towards children when rearing them (Démurger and Xu, 2011). Correspondingly, children and young people still express 'the importance of supporting, assisting, and respecting their families both currently and in the future when they become adults' (Fuligni and Zhang, 2004:191). In the field, similarly, as emerged from chats with a couple of returned migrant workers, children's development was the central consideration when deciding to start and finish migrant work. For example, as stated by Cai's mother, who returned to town when Cai entered P5, she left to 'make more money because raising a child now is costly; whatever the club [e.g., dancing and drawing], it costs hundreds or around thousand Chinese Yuan', and returned because 'Cai is going to be in middle school with an increasing need of stronger academic tutoring that her grandparents cannot handle' (Field note, June 2016). From the children's

perspective, as children of migrant parents commonly explained in conversations in the field, they kept studying hard not only for themselves but also to repay their parents. In their words, since their parents' motivation for industriously working away from the hometown was to make money to provide them with a better life, it was their obligation to repay their parents by performing (*biaoxian*) well at school and becoming a promising student, with the ability to 'well take care of my parents when they get old, like what they are doing to me now' (Fuming, a P5 boy, May 2016).

The above-described conversations with migrant parents and their children suggest that a feeling of mutual obligation is prominent in the relationship of parents and children. Also, their ways of fulfilling family obligations conformed to other scholars' findings that today, as academic achievement is heavily stressed in the Chinese context[3], in families with children in school, the parents' obligation is considered to include improving children's educational (academic) success as part of a 'family business' (Huang and Gove, 2015:44); while for children, 'success in academic life is one of the most important filial duties' (Xu, 2016:4). Accordingly, because of the belief that high-achieving friends have a positive influence on children's academic performance (e.g., Hanushek et al., 2003), parents' practice of educating children to befriend "good" classmates, and children's acceptance of this friend selection rule, support both children and parents in performing their family obligations.

Apart from family obligation, since Chinese Confucian culture conceptualizes family members as 'one body' (Kwan, 2000:24), the family's collective "face" (*lianmian*) shared by its members can be another factor that strengthens parents' concern over the influence of friends on their own children's individual success. For example, when I visited Bao's (a P5 boy) home with his class teacher on March 2016, Bao's grandmother asked his class teacher who the boy's friends were at school. Bao chipped in to propose his high-achieving deskmate, Qian, as his friend, concealing his "true" friend, Ouyang, a boy who was labelled the most famous naughty boy in P5. However, Bao's lie was exposed by his class teacher. Then Bao's grandmother angrily warned Bao to stay away from his naughty friend, saying 'if you keep playing with him, how can you improve your study? If you keep behaving like this [referring

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[3] Because of the significant gap in terms of life quality that stem from different degrees of economic development in rural and urban areas, rural people expect to gain opportunities to leave their villages and live in cities as modern, urban people with a better standard of living (e.g. Li, 1999, Wang, 2009, 2013). Examinations, such as *gaokao* (the mandatory national examination for entering universities), are the main means by which China selects people from its large population to access its limited educational resources (Salili et al., 2001; Ye and Yao, 2001). Consequently, in rural areas, the main gauge of success remains passing examinations, which is viewed as 'the only real way' (p. 246) for rural children to enter universities in urban cities and stay there to gain jobs and household registrations, and to escape their previous generations' identities of rural people (Dello-Iacovo, 2009).

to academic performance], do not ask me to attend your next parent meeting (*jiazhang hui*[4]); I do not want to lose face together with you'. In this example, Bao's grandmother viewed Bao's unsatisfied academic performance as a shameful affair that not only matters to Bao but also to her own "face". A similar finding on the influence of children's performance on parents' "face" has been presented by other scholars. As exampled by Schoenhals (2016:88), in the Chinese school setting, winning glory (*zheng guang*) [or gaining face (*zhanglian*)] for parents was used to reward children's good performance (e.g., academic success), while causing loss of face for the parents (*diu ta fumu de lian*) was used to criticize a child's failure (e.g., in a major test). This phenomenon can be rooted in the Chinese family principle that children's 'individual development and performance are to achieve the success of the family' (Huang and Gove, 2015:44). Conversely, children's individual failures shame both themselves and their parents because, in the Chinese context, there is a 'tendency to credit superiors for the successes of their inferiors and blame them for their failures' (Schoenhals, 2016:88). Therefore, since parents viewed children not only as individuals but also as members of family collective, parents' intervention on their children's friend selection at school can be understood as an attempt to protect their children's, themselves' and their family collective's interests.

The influences of parents' intervention on children's friend selection

Parents' emphasis on the importance of befriending "good" friends as discussed in above paragraphs might be used to explain the observed phenomenon that, in the field, children with good academic performance were welcomed by peers as the ideal candidate for "good" friends; the majority of the other children were keen to make friends or at least keep on good terms with them. For example, among these P5 children, there seemed to a type of friendship, in which friends' "usefulness" in helping one to achieve personal goals at school is particularly emphasized. In conversations with children, around half of P5 children once stated that they befriended certain other children because these friends were high-achieving (*youxiu*). Thus they were commonly noted as "useful" friends for themselves (*dui ziji you bangzhu*). Moreover, as happened in above discussed Bao's case, it was not rare to notice that many children showed a tendency of naming the "good" classmates as "friends" and hiding the "bad" ones in front of adults, despite spending more time with the "bad" ones than with the "good" ones. This tendency was straightforwardly evidenced by the contradictory data between children's nominated friends in conversations with teachers/parents/me (as adult researcher) and the ones they closely engaged with in a friend-way in observations. Although this

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[4] A meeting organized by the class teacher to share with all parents information about their children's performance at school. In the meeting, teachers always share with parents the children's grade and rank in the last major exam and overall performance (which is more about behaviour).

tendency shows that children might resist parents' education in practices, it also suggests that children have clearly noticed their parents' requirements on their friend selection. This strategy of hiding friends whom their parents disliked was applied by children to achieve 'harmony within hierarchy' (Bond and Hwang, 1986:213) in relationships with parents, at least on surface. Otherwise, as disclosed by a small number of children that, they always felt heavy emotional stress when their parents blamed them as "*bu tinghua*" ("not take in parents' talks") because this criticism made them doubt whether or not they were "good" children (see also Xu et al., 2006).

On the one hand, parents' intervention can at times be beneficial. For example, it can protect children from friends' negative influences and support them to find helpful friends (Frankel and Myatt, 2013). However, on the other hands, parents' intervention can cause children stress in friendship experiences. As emerged in this research, two risks were prominent. Firstly, when parents' constructions of "good" friends do not match with self's constructions of "good" friends, children might struggle over whom to give their allegiance to (e.g., themselves or parents). For example, following the above discussed Bao's case, in the following day, Bao explained to me that he had lied about his relationships with Qian and Ouyang because he did not want to upset his grandmother, who never allowed him to play with Ouyang, who was renowned as a "troublemaker" in P5. However, Bao disclosed that he preferred to be with Ouyang much more than with Qian because Ouyang could bring him into many interesting games while Qian only focused on supervising his study. These mismatched constructions of "good" friends were also supported in other cases. For example, when talked about "good" friends, quite a few children highlighted the emotional closeness and fun as important characteristics. It suggests that the characteristics, such as good grades and disciplined behaviour, highlighted by parents as the hallmarks of a "good friend" might not in fact play an important role in children's "good" friendship, where attachment and fun (see also Spencer and Pahl, 2006) are highlighted. In this case, because of the unmatched ways of constructing "good" friends, as complained by a small group of children in conversations that, it was difficult for them to play with some friends, whom their parents disliked, in school holidays. For example, they found difficult to persuade parents to allow them to invite these friends to play at own home or to visit these friends[5].

Secondly, parents' emphasis on academic achievement in constructions of "good" friends might contribute to the "hierarchy" between children with different academic performances. It is common

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[5] Because of the long-lasting consequences caused by 1990s' national school merging policy (*cedian bingxiao*) in rural area of China, Central Primary School serves over 300 pupils from nine surrounding villages belonging to Grassland Township. In this case, it is common that children and their "good" friends are not live geographically close. In this case, as said by children, in school holidays, when they wanted to visit their friends in another villages, they always needed their parents' support in transport.

to notice that children's academic achievement could influence the children's acceptance among their classmates in school settings (e.g., Morrison and Burgman, 2009). However, Chinese parents' strong emphasis on the importance of academic performance might furtherly strengthen this element's influences on children's attitude toward peers at school (see also Xu, 2016). For example, in the field most of the P5 children explained that academic performance functions as a 'boundary' to divide children into hierarchical groups, consisting of students with good academic performance (*youdeng sheng*), middle-ranked students (*zhongdeng sheng*), and students with poor academic performance (*cha sheng*) (see also Wu, 2016). In both observations and conversations, the principle that 'people with good academic performance play together and people with poor academic performance play together', as stated by Jieyu, a P5 girl, was commonly invoked by children, especially the high-achieving ones, as the "play rule". Again, the Chinese idiom of "*jin zhu zhe chi, jin mo zhe hei*", what they learned from parents, was also always referenced to support this "play rule". In due course, children with poor academic performance were likely to be 'left out of games run by children with good academic performance', as Liwen, a P5 girl, complained. This exclusive "play rule" was given as an example by a number of children on a range of occasions (e.g., informal chats, formal interviews and school work) to criticize some peers' discriminatory actions that had hurt their feelings.

However, with a willingness of befriending high-achieving peers to seek for opportunities to improve self, some low-achieving children still tried to break the boundaries to befriend high-achieving peers. In such process, because of the "hierarchy" between high-achieving children and low-achieving children, there was a risk that low-achieving children might experience some difficulties. As emerged from conversations with high-achieving children, it was clear that they commonly recognised their "attractiveness" to other peers because 'they [referring to classmates with relatively lower academic achievement] all like to befriend us [referring to ones with good academic performance] because they can learn from us to improve their academic performance then improve status in class' (Wenhua, a P5 girl, Field note, June 2016). In this case, these high-achieving children might be aware that they have the "privilege" of being able to select friends from a large group of peers, all wanting to befriend them. This would result in the children with lower grades, needing to engage in intense competition to fight for the chance to be accepted as friends by these high-achieving children.

During the "competitive" process of befriending these welcomed high-achievers, some children might experience being exploited. For example, as reported by several children, when they befriended high-achieving peers, doing them favours was reported as one of the most effective and necessary ways. However, in this process of doing these favours, the children needed to invest their own time and properties, which might go against their own interests. For instance, as exampled by Ma, a P5 boy,

that even though he did not like cleaning the rubbish bins, as they were so dirty, he still agreed every time when the high-achieving peers, whom he wanted to befriend, asked him to do this job. Ma explained the reason as: 'If you said no, they would be unhappy. If you refused many times to help, they would think you are not good to them and would befriend others instead of you' (Field note, May 2016). Ma's words indicate that even when performing certain favours might go against their own interests, the weaker children agreed to do anything every time because it was very difficult for them to say no as a result of their strong desire to befriend the high-achievers.

Conclusion

When studying children's' friendships in contexts (Adams and Allan, 1998), parental influence, as an important 'network level' element of context (p. 6), can shape children's friendship experiences (e.g., Rubin et al., 1984; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2015). In Chinese context, because of the embedded Confucian values – children need to show obedience to parents and family members are 'one body' (Kwan, 2000:24) – parents' influences on children's friendships are strengthened. From parents' perspective, since family is a collective unit, they constructed their children's friendships as an affair that not only matters to children but also to themselves. In this case, they were motivated to "monitor" their children's selections of friends at school. According to children's obedient reactions when being educated about this rule, it is very likely that they have been made aware that, although whom to befriend was an individual choice, the consequences do not just affect themselves. The consequences are collective as well, with influences on their parents.

This chapter suggests that parents' ways of constructing "good" friends can both directly and indirectly shape children's friendship experiences at school. For example, parents' unencouraged attitude (e.g., refusal of offering transport support) can directly restrict their children's interactions with some friends in school holidays; parents' academic achievement-focused way of constructing "good" friends might encourage the formation of "hierarchy" between high-achieving and low-achieving children, which can cause children with different academic achievements different friendship experiences at school. Therefore, on the one hand, parents' intervention can at times have positive influences on children's friendship experiences and future personal development (e.g., by supporting children's efforts to avoid friends' negative influences and to find helpful friends). However, on the other hand, parents' intervention in children's understandings of friendship and their choice of friends, which are strongly embedded with values highlighting friends' school achievements and the instrumental function of friendship, could cause children stress and, for the lower-achieving children, could result in exclusion by their peers at school because of their lesser ability to make themselves useful and

helpful to their peers. In this case, how to provide children parental support in their friendship experiences in suitable ways can be a question to explore in future studies.

Apart from exploring parents' intervention on children's friend selection, this chapter also indicates that these Chinese children did not passively accept all of these controls. Rather, they actively negotiate with or even 'subvert and challenge forms of regulation and control' (Harden, 2012:85) in order to gain control over their lives in the process of constructing their everyday school lives with their peers. For example, as discussed in this chapter, children resisted adult control by hiding their friendship choices. In this case, through showing how children accommodate and resist parents' intervention on their friend selection, this chapter's findings stands in line with the argument that children are active social actors and agents with capabilities (James and Prout, 2003; Wyness, 2012; Corsaro, 2015) to actively respond to and negotiate the surrounding contexts in the process of understanding and practising relationships with others.

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