Original Research Article

Like Water: Feeling and Negotiating Relational Complexity in School-Based Ethnographic Childhood Research in China Through the Lens of Emotional Reflexivity

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Abstract
Ethnography is often considered as a suitable methodological approach to explore childhoods, nevertheless, there is limited reflection on ethics in the field in the Global South educational settings, such as China. Previous China-based fieldwork studies suggest complex field relationships as a major ethical challenge. Although the issue is especially prominent in research that contests "normative" Chinese childhoods, it hasn't been sufficiently discussed due to a culture of silence surrounding researchers' emotions and positionality. This paper uses emotional reflexivity as a lens to revisit two Chinese female researchers' experiences of fieldwork, respectively, with left-behind children and disabled children in Chinese primary schools. The analysis examines how we identified ourselves and negotiated complex relationships with school members and unpacks experiences of "sameness" and "otherness" and the vulnerability and creditability impacted by our fluid identities. The paper adds insights into ethical considerations of school-based ethnographic research with diverse children in the Global South.

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Introduction

Ethnography has gained much popularity as a methodological choice in studies of children and childhoods, especially following the emergence of the "new sociology of childhood," which conceptualizes children as competent social actors and emphasizes the necessity to recognize their knowledge (Allerton 2016). Defined by Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) as a process that usually involves ". . .the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions—in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research" (1), ethnography indeed leans itself to be a "particularly useful methodology" in childhood research (James and Prout 2003, 8) for an array of rather unique affordances. On the one hand, there is coherence between the theoretical underpinnings of childhood studies and ethnographic research, as summarized by Gallagher (2009, 72) that "ontologically, an ethnographic approach to childhood studies views children as having distinctive cultures and respects them as beings, as natives of their cultures, and as experts in their own lives. . .epistemologically, an ethnographic approach to childhood studies involves viewing the interpretative knowledge of childhood as not being 'out there' waiting to be collected, but as needing to be constructed by interacting with children." On the other hand, the time and space provided by ethnographic fieldwork as "a process of discovery, making inferences, and continuing inquiries" (Whitehead 2005, 4) can facilitate rapport building with children to balance power relations (Robinson and Kellett 2004); and the accommodation of multiple methods of data collection (Whitehead 2005) may usefully enable researchers to be more responsive and inclusive to children's individuality and diverse ways of communication.

Nonetheless, despite its offering to childhood research, ethnography is also meanwhile known to often entail risks of complex ethical tensions and dilemmas throughout the research process (Eder and Corsaro 1999). Given the close involvement experienced by ethnographers in the studied society and culture and how their actions also construct social reality, reflexivity—the awareness of one's own assumptions, beliefs, and actions in relation to circumstances—is therefore considered to be particularly salient and central to ethnographic research (Davies 2008; Hammersley and Atkinson 2019; Reeves et al. 2008). Although much has already been discussed on the

meaning and the *doing* of reflexivity (e.g., Forbes 2008; Mauthner and Doucet 2003), Holmes (2015) notes that in most cases, reflexivity tends to be limited to reflections on the relations between researchers and participants. Examples of such reflections can be found in discussions of the fluid insider-outsider membership through examining the identities of researchers and participants (e.g., Kerstetter 2012; Thomson and Gunter 2011). Practical and simplified "strategies" are commonly recommended to novice researchers as the solutions to managing fieldwork; for instance, it has become nearly a norm in school-based research that researchers should deliberately perform a friendly adult role to differentiate themselves from teachers in order to gain children's trust and acceptance (Corsaro 2003; Christensen 2004). Nevertheless, much less account seems to be given to researchers' embodied experiences of emotions when negotiating field relations—an essential aspect of reflexivity which especially guides us to navigate rather complex social conditions (Holmes 2010). We recognize such omission as a missed opportunity to gain deeper insights into the studied social world of children and childhoods. We also perceive our act of "revisiting" our field research as an attempt to challenge a common tendency in childhood research, as noted by Cooper (2023) and Mayes (2019), of exploring children's voices, which are often narrowly understood as their verbal accounts, as objective, disembodied, and disconnected from the broader social, relational, and material contexts. Querying the limitation of reducing "voice" to text, researchers have been engaging in experimental, audio, visual, and creative methods to consider meaning beyond representations (e.g., Gallagher 2020; Hacketta et al. 2016; Vacchelli 2018). In this paper, we specifically seek to break the silence of researchers' role in shaping children's voices and shift our attentiveness to the processes of how researchers' affective and embodied experiences encounter and connect with those of children (Cooper et al. 2019; Cooper 2023; Mazzei and Jackson 2017).

We will use "ethnography" as the umbrella methodological term for research that employs ethnographic methods. As the authors, we both completed our doctoral research prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Our research, through an ethnographic approach, aims to understand the daily experiences of two marginalized groups of children in the context of Chinese primary schooling— "left-behind" children and disabled children. When we shared with each other our field experiences amid co-editing a special issue on equality, diversity, and inclusion in Chinese childhoods (Zhu et al., 2023), we noticed that our own emotions in the field as we negotiated various complex situations remained somehow hidden behind the previous written accounts. The exchange led us to revisit and "relive" some of the significant ethnographic moments of our fieldwork experiences by further unpacking critical encounters captured in

fieldnotes through the lens of emotional reflexivity (Burkitt 2012; Holmes 2015). This article aims to shed light on the rich and in-depth meanings ethnographic researchers can learn should we carefully examine the emotional tensions and struggles in the field. More specifically, it adds to the limited reflexive analysis of researchers' emotional encountering of local norms and rules in school-based fieldwork that aggravate inequality and marginalization and actions of negotiating "Westernized" approaches to children's rights and ethics (e.g., children's rights to protection, participation, and independent decision about joining a research project). It also contributes to the growing broader discussion of decolonizing childhood studies by making visible diverse and complex childhoods in the Global South to complicate dominating northern discourses (Imoh et al. 2019; Liebel 2020). However, we recognize the need to strike a balance between acknowledging the unique aspects of the Chinese context and the shared vulnerability of children in societies influenced by global adult-dominated discourses. This helps us avoid overemphasizing differences and neglecting commonalities. Additionally, to prevent oversimplifying sociocultural norms and ethical challenges in child research across different regions of China, this article refrains from representing the wide range of experiences among researchers in China. We acknowledge that individual researchers' experiences must be examined using an intersectional perspective to understand the variations that may arise due to factors like gender, age, socioeconomic status, educational background, and more.

Emotional Reflexivity, Relationality, and Identities

In ethnography, reflexivity plays a significant impact on the entire fieldwork from data collection to analysis (Davies 2008). How to understand and use reflexivity is an ongoing debate among sociologists. Through reviewing different sociologists' contributions to the conceptualization of reflexivity (e.g., Gidden, Beck, and Archer), some scholars argue that there is a tendency of understanding reflexivity as an "individualistic and rationalistic process, in which individual researchers increasingly "stand back" from their world and their own actions" (Burkitt 2012, 459) to reflect on their relations with research participants and understand surrounding world through ongoing "internal conversations" (Archer 2003, cited in Holmes 2010). Also, they criticize the phenomenon of "over-focus[ing] on the cognitive and the individual" but neglecting emotions in reflexivity practices as well as a tradition of ignoring participants but only limiting reflexivity to be a methodological approach for researchers' internal reflections (Holmes 2010, 2015).

Recently, the importance of respecting emotions and relationality is increasingly emphasized. For example, Holmes (2010, 140) discusses the

significance of emotionalizing reflexivity and argues that reflexivity in research should be appreciated as an "emotional, embodied and cognitive process" participated by both researchers and participants. She particularly highlights the importance of valuing "emotional reflexivity," which refers to "the intersubjective interpretation of one's own and others' emotions and how they are enacted" (Holmes 2015, 61) and appreciating it as "a capacity not just of researchers, but of participants" (65). Highlighting the emotionality of reflexivity does not only acknowledge "the emotional dynamics involved in reflexive processes" (Zembylas 2014, 211) but also indicates embedded power relations and sociocultural norms that shape interpersonal relationships through interpreting socialized emotions in emotional interactions. Therefore, our reflexivity and view of ourselves are two-way, directed by both our own value system and the response of others, including their emotions (Burkitt 2012). We draw on emotions to navigate our path as "social actors [who] have feelings about and try to understand and alter their lives in relation to their social and natural environment and to others" (Holmes 2010, 140). When using emotions to color reflexivity, Burkitt (2012) believes that it is important to "put emotions back into the context of social interactions and relationships in which they arise" (459). The fruitful findings gained through reviewing emotions reflexively in the context of doing research with children and young people have been gradually recognized as adding to data collection, ethics reflection, and data analysis.

Identity and positionalities also play a significant role in ethnography. As argued by DeLuca and Maddox (2016, 286) that "without engaging with the self, identifying positionalities, and managing shifting identities in the field, one simply cannot conduct rigorous and honest ethnographic research." Such identity is not just about individual identities, such as individuals' age, gender, marital status, race, ethnicity, and profession, but also about social identities, as the ones that focus on connecting individuals and society through different types of groups that we belong to. Social identity theory could provide a useful framework for collective reflexivity; for example, members of the same community (e.g., ethnographers in childhood studies) could start with their shared identities to explore how collective understandings affect their views and interpretations of the world and other people (Eriksson et al. 2012). Through unpacking the inclusion and exclusion processes (e.g., "accepting," "othering," "marginalizing") of constructing in-group (we) and out-groups (others), it is possible to uncover relevant "contextual dimension of identity formation" because identities are "residing in circumscribed practices such as norms and roles" (Hogg et al. 1995, cited in Eriksson et al. 2012, 11).

Measuring identities in ethnography is understood as an important element of reflexive fieldwork. For instance, "insider" and "outsider" roles are

often discussed by ethnographers. As discussed by Dwyer and Buckle (2009, 55), researchers could be insiders if they share "characteristic, role, or experience under study with the participants" or outsiders to "the commonality shared by participants." Many scholars have argued that both "insider" and "outsider" roles have their benefits and costs. Insider role always allows researchers a good level of acceptance, trust, and openness in participants (Dwyer and Buckle 2009). Insider role could also cause drawbacks. For example, "the researcher's perceptions might be clouded by his or her personal experience and that as a member of the group, he or she will have difficulty separating it from that of the participants" (Dwyer and Buckle 2009, 58). In this case, there are some situations that researchers find it unclear to distinguish if their interpretation is about an actual phenomenon or if they are projecting their own needs onto their participants (Watson 1999, cited in Dwyer and Buckle 2009). Although "outsider" role might cause researchers more challenges in the processes of gaining access to research settings as well as being accepted and trusted by participants, not being a member of the group sometimes could build up an adequate distance to facilitate the knowing of a researched group (Dwyer and Buckle 2009). But it should be noted that the overly simplistic dichotomy of "insider" and "outsider" status has been challenged by a dialectical approach of including the notion of "space between" into the discussion to allow "the preservation of the complexity of similarities and differences" (Dwyer and Buckle 2009, 60).

The necessity to foreground the embodied and interconnected experiences of researchers and children beyond a mere focus on textual and verbalized "voices" and recognize the complexity of processes, networks, and relations in field research, as discussed above, also seems to be well aligned with the useful arguments offered by authors such as Cooper (2023), Mayes (2019), Mazzei and Jackson (2017) on how research encounters could be perceived as assemblages in which children are repositioned as agentic key actors. The embodied experiences of emotions are much less considered and integrated into discussions about membership, especially in childhood research in the Global South. On the basis of recognizing our fluid identities as "insiders" and "outsiders" in our ethnographic fields, our discussion later will focus on unpacking our feelings and actions in daily encounters with children and teachers.

Revisiting Fieldwork

Both of us grew up in China and undertook doctoral studies as young female international students in the same research-intensive university in the Global North during the 2010s. Both of our projects were influenced by childhood

studies, highlighting a shared keen interest in children's perspectives. We both conducted ethnographic fieldwork in primary schools in China: Yan did her five-month-long fieldwork in a rural primary boarding school in the western area of Hubei Province to explore the complexity and diversity of Chinese children's understandings and practices of peer friendships. She worked with forty nine Primary Year five children, including twenty five boys and twenty four girls, who were aged eleven to thirteen years old at the time, and also participated in the children's daily school routines and frequently interacted with several significant adults, including seven teachers and child participants' guardians (see a fully described account of the project in Zhu 2019); Yuchen did her four-month long fieldwork in selected four urban mainstream primary schools to explore disabled children's experiences and barriers to their learning and participation. She worked with eleven children who were labeled with learning difficulties and thirteen teachers and followed children's daily activities (see a fully described account of the project in Wang 2016). Both of us documented our encounters in fieldnotes and diaries. In such notes and diaries, it was noticeable that our and participants' "feelings, sensations, thoughts, words and actions all flow seamlessly and sometimes almost instantaneously" (Burkitt 2012, 469). Although reflexivity, in many cases, was viewed as an "internal conversation," it could be enriched by collective dialogs and interpretations (Holmes 2010). To develop the analysis in this paper, we together revisited the records that captured rich "relational, dialogical and emotional" reflexivity (Burkitt 2012, 471) to seek explanations of emotions shared by children, teachers, and ourselves, unpacking the coexistence of the "sameness" and "otherness" of our fluid researcher identities and complex emotional relations in the field (Holmes 2010). We acknowledge that due to the specific focuses of our projects and that, at the time, the notion of emotional reflexibility was not adopted as a dominant lens in our fieldwork, the descriptions of our emotions in the fieldnotes presented below might appear to be relatively brief and fleeting though these events. Nevertheless, we must avoid the potential risk of "reinventing" events since such revisiting is detached from the exact field involvement (Boccagni 2011). Therefore, we did not make changes to the original fieldnotes while retaining the authenticity of how we felt and acted as we developed further analysis of the emotionally significant encountering.

Lenz Taguchi and Palmer (2013) noted that researchers would inevitably make embodied engagements with their past and present experiences and their knowledge of the realities the participants live in. They described their experiences as passing themselves "over to a flow of entangled social, material, and discursive forces in the apparatus of knowing, where one text would link, connect or collide with another, and produce something new or

different." (675), which interestingly resembles our experiences of revisiting the field encounters to gain new insights. Particularly drawing on Barad (2007), Fox and Alldred (2023) also reiterated the necessity to consider the inevitable impact of researchers' entanglements when producing knowledge. Our gazing of these significant ethnographic moments, which indeed have remained rather "unforgettable" over the years—to date, we still experience intense emotional feelings when we recall the various events discussed in this paper—is also shaped by our evolved understandings, professionally and personally. This echoes the argument that researchers' agential cuts of what is observed may well be informed by their own experiences and identities (Cooper, 2023). We came to know about left-behind children and disabled children's experiences in China through our experiences of friendships, bullying, and adult-child power relations as we grew up, our later experiences of working with educational practitioners, and how these children are portrayed by media and policies as the receiving ends of stigma and sympathy in a Confucian society. After completing our studies and gaining our doctoral degrees, the relocation to the Global North inevitably created challenges for us to make a difference in these children's real lives while continuing to observe the lack of ethical practices in the country when involving children in research. Nevertheless, the relocation and the repositioning also exposed us to forms of discrimination such as sexism, ableism, and racism we encounter in neoliberal higher education institutions, and these experiences deeply (re)connect us with the children we met and compel us to exercise further rethinking about our feelings and actions during the fieldwork.

Feeling and Negotiating the Adult–Adult Relations

Since both identity and reflexivity are created through social relations to others in specific contexts (Burkitt 2012), to interpret emotions and identities, it is necessary to locate such interpretations in the broader social contexts within which emotions and identities are produced in relations to other people and things (Holmes 2010; Kustatscher 2017).

Schools are strictly managed organizations in China's tightly controlled and politicized education system (Li et al. 2004). The purpose of education and the devising of the Chinese schooling system has been historically shaped by Communism with a great emphasis on embedding political values and utilizing education as a tool to govern (Arens 1952). As two school-based projects, approval from local governmental and educational authorities was explicitly expected for us to gain access to schools, which also acted as a censoring and "safeguarding" scheme for schools to only get involved in politically impartial activities adhering to the government's socialist

ideology. We followed previous scholars' suggestions of doing fieldwork in China (Heimer and Thøgersen 2006) to draw on our personal networks to identify the "powerful" key contacts to facilitate access. Yan's project was approved by one top-ranking political leader in a local authority, who over-saw support services for women and children, and Yuchen's project was approved by the lead officer of special education in a local educational authority, who was also a key policymaker of educational services for dis-abled children. Nevertheless, such endorsement had several less expected implications on the field relations with school members.

In the early stage of our fieldwork, both of us struggled with locals' assumptions of our "political identities" (*zhengzhi shenfen*) and suspicions about the "true" purposes of our visits. For example, Yan was worried about her relationships with locals because she felt that she was suspected by her gatekeeper as a powerful figure with a strong political network within the local government.

> . . .after I wrote to Aiping (local gatekeeper) that I am a bit nervous about the forthcoming fieldwork (e.g., I particularly mentioned my concern about living alone in the school on the weekend as a young woman, and asked whether or not there will be other female teachers staying in the school during the weekends), she sent me a surprised emoji and wrote "doctor, doctors who come here are all 'fu chuji'.[1] What does this mean? What is the 'hidden message' behind her answer? Also, why does she mention 'fu chuji'? I feel that she is making a connection between educational achievements with political levels. Does she mean 'doctors are powerful' and then nobody will 'mess up' with me"? Does this mean my educational identity (a Ph.D. candidate, holding a Chinese governmental scholarship) and my ways of gaining contact with her (support from higher governmental authority) make her feel that I 'am' powerful or are likely to have a "bright" political future to be powerful? If my inside contact sees me in this way, how about other locals? Will they see me in the same way? If they see me the same way, how will this assumption shape their attitudes, behaviours, and expectations in front of me? (Yan, Fieldnotes 15th December 2015)

Burkitt (2012) argues that the way we feel about ourselves is influenced by "how we *imagine* the other is looking at us and our *interpretation* of their judgement" (465). Yan's worry came from her rejection to be looked at as a politically "powerful" person and her interpretation of the "disconnec-tion" between politically "powerful" people and ordinary people in Chinese context. As Ahmed (2004) argues that, when we are reading oth-ers, how we feel about another is "not simply a matter of individual impres-sions, or impressions that are created anew in the present" (39); instead, it

is a combined result of imagination, mediation, and already-in-place feelings shaped by histories. Similarly, fear toward holders of political power was commonly reported in Chinese studies, such as hostility displayed by "ordinary people" (*laobaixing*) to "office-holders" (*dangguande*) (e.g., Thøgersen 2006, 113).

Furthermore, emotions are biographically fluid with "carry-over" effects from past experiences of emotions (Setes, 2010; Jacobsen, 2019). As native Chinese who grew up in mainland China, we both shared childhood memories of being required by teachers to carefully perform the pre-designed and practiced ways of acting in front of "office-holders," such as showing the "good" and hiding the "bad" when responding to the surveys run by officials from superior institutions. Therefore, when we imagined that the locals were looking at us as the ones who may have close ties to "office-holders," we anxiously interpreted such impression as a potential threat to trustful relationships with locals and the authenticity of collected data from interviews and observations because such perceived identity distances us from local ordinary people's "voices" and their "truth." For example, when the Yuchen was suspected as an education inspector,[2] she was also worried whether the school might only present her a carefully constructed image of its inclusive practice and underpinning beliefs to match usual inspectors' expectations.

Unfortunately, our concern was confirmed in our interactions with teachers in the beginning. For example, Thøgersen (2006) notes that "'the Chinese language' is in itself a political construct" (111). For example, Thøgersen (2006) uses "*Baixingese*" and "*Ganbunese*" to refer respectively to the language codes used by "ordinary people" (*laobaixing*) in everyday conversations and the "official language of the state apparatus" (112) used in public documents and announcements, especially by "office-holders" (*dangguande*). Given the suspicions of our political background/power and the purpose of our visits, it was not uncommon to notice that teachers tended to use "*Ganbunese*" (Thøgersen 2006) when communicating with us. Both of us experienced a persistent feeling of distance between us and teachers when we initially arrived at the sites. For example, words such as "quiet," "cautious," "stiff," "awkward," and "anxious" were often used by both of us when we recorded the interactions between us and teachers. Therefore, to respond to this concern over our perceived "political identity" in the field, after we entered the field, both of us deliberately worked to sincerely clarify our non-political identities through self-disclosure (e.g., student status, family background, etc) (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019) with teachers. Being authentic about our social position as an "ordinary person" (*bai xing*) effectively connected our emotions of trust and created a safe space for voice, especially about "critical" comments, such as views over policy rhetoric. For example,

as recorded by Yuchen in her fieldnotes on November 12 2013, when she was suspected as an education inspector, their conversation was "*stiff and awkward*," and the headteacher was "*quiet*" and "*very cautious*" about how to respond to her; however, after she clarified she had no relations with educational inspectors, the headteacher's reaction was '*suddenly her face relaxed and brightened with a burst of smile. . .Later she delightfully went to the office downstairs and said to the special education coordinator: 'You have made a mistake. This is just a little girl doing her dissertation. What she writes and sees will not be known to the upper-levels*'. For Yuchen, by differentiating her role from an inspector, the headteacher eventually gave an honest account of the sensitive topic of disability inclusion issues by describing the difficulties faced by the school to integrate disabled children while coping with the very high academic pressure and shortage of teachers.

However, it was not always easy to clearly differentiate ourselves from officials. For example, Yan's gatekeeper, Ms Aiping, was a top-ranking political leader in a local authority, and she was very supportive and kind to Yan. For example, she offered to send Yan to the school on her first fieldwork day, supported Yan by preparing the dormitory room, and came to school to visit Yan occasionally, bringing food. However, "*guanxi*" (relationships) in China is "not simply a dyadic structure, but a triadic one, which includes the observer" (Herrmann-Pillath 2010, 337). Our closeness, as displayed by Ms Aiping, further attached a "political label" to Yan in the eyes of the school's teachers. Although sometimes Yan was overwhelmed because of teachers' assumption of her political identity and heavy workload in ethnographic fieldwork when she was invited by Ms Aiping to some social events, she didn't feel easy to reject Ms Aiping's invitations. As she recorded in her fieldnotes, Yan felt she "*shouldn't and can't annoy (de zui) Ms Aiping*" because she didn't want to risk her access to conduct fieldwork at school granted by the support offered by Ms Aiping. As both of us admitted, when we reflected on our ways of gaining permission to enter school settings, there was a fear of the possibility that our personal requests to conduct fieldwork at school might be rejected if we differentiated ourselves from officials.

Thomson and Gunter (2011) suggested that researcher identities were becoming "highly liquid, porous, unbounded" in these "globalized and heterogeneous times" (27). Interestingly, on the one hand, we experienced some tensions about our domestic political identities and the purpose of our visits as described above; on the other hand, our association as doctoral students with a Western university also complicated the field relations when we were inevitably perceived to be "westernized" whose approaches often tended to be questioned (see Cui 2015; Wang 2013). For example, Yuchen encountered another significant ethnographic moment when her research interest in the

welfare of disabled children was perceived by a local teacher to be representing a Western ideological stance.

> In one participating school, a group of disabled children attended lessons regularly in a "resource classroom" separate from peers. One afternoon, as part of some rehearsal for a TV programme shooting about extra-curricular activities, the whole class including the child participant Lian roamed to check out the space. I happened to be in a meeting with the resource teacher inside the office and overheard the teacher leading the tour saying to the pupils "This place is for children who have problems with their brains." It was upsetting for me to hear this. I felt angry and immediately said to the resource teacher that such stigmatising comments should not happen and she went out to intervene. (Yuchen, Fieldnotes, 6th December 2013)

> (Several days later) The resource teacher told me that the teacher felt embarrassed for making the school "lose face" in front of an outsider and also complained: "If you are looking for humanity, you should go to the West." The sense of alienation lingered in me for days and the teacher pretended to not have seen me when we walked past each other on the campus. (Yuchen, Fieldnotes, 20th December 2013)

In China, disabled children have long been one of the most marginalized groups. Through analyzing 1950s magazine images of Chinese children, Guleva (2021) summaries that "the 'normative' children appeared neat, healthy, energetic, enthusiastic, well-educated in whatever knowledge was required from them at the time, helpful, and looking forward to the brave new world ahead" (70). "Normative" children in China tend to be constructed as homogeneously "healthy" and often, issues of disability seem to be omitted or not explicitly dealt with in discussions of Chinese childhoods, reinforcing an image that this group of children is invisible. Traditionally, in Chinese society, having a disabled child tends to be viewed as a tragedy and a negative consequence of karma (Merry and Zhao 1998), which would make a family lose face for not having good morality in previous lives and subjected to shame. The statistics show that disabled children have long been one of the main groups of child abandonment in the country (Hu and Szente 2009), which may be viewed as evidence of the positioning of disabled children as the "unwanted" children to fulfill filial piety (e.g., look after elderly family) and social roles, especially in a system where there lacks family support services (Raffety 2019; Shang and Fisher 2014). With a history of segregated schooling for disabled children since the founding of the country (Government Administrative Council 1951) and a massive process of medicalization later in the 1980s to identify and label those perceived to be dysfunctional',

"needy'," "special," or "different" as the disabled (Kohrman 2005, 6), a deficit-view of disability prevails and disabled children still face much stigma and exclusion in education—they remain the only group of children who are still not granted the unconditional right to inclusive schooling alongside non-disabled peers. While some authors note Confucianism as a supportive belief for its emphasis on harmony (*he xie*) and benevolence (*ren*) (e.g., Feng 2010; Yu et al. 2011), especially given the recent nationalist campaign in China to revive Confucianism (Bell 2014), its potential oppressive impact is much less examined as the maintaining of a social hierarchy (Wei and Li 2013) often positions disabled children at the receiving ends of charitable sympathy (Yu et al. 2011), overlooking their rights to equitable provision (Wang 2021; Zhang and Rosen 2018).

When Yuchen was conducting her fieldwork in mainstream schools, the practices to push disabled children out of these spaces underpinned by deep-rooted barriers, such as the medical and charitable models of disability and the ableist competitive culture, were observed on a daily basis. Although the study was intended to understand "what's happening" instead of directly changing any practice, a longer-term emancipatory purpose of the study was to help inform solutions to reduce the structural inequalities and inequities faced by this group of children. Before the incident, Yuchen had been in the school for a few weeks and built good relationships with the resource teacher and the group of disabled children she worked with in the resource classroom, including the girl Lian. The resource teacher who used to work as a senior management in the school was personally passionate about tackling exclusion, and she was always proactive about protesting against problematic practices. Lian lives with a more severe form of learning difficulties, and she was subjected to bullying from non-disabled peers and stigmatizing comments from some teachers. At the time, many children in the school were still unfamiliar with the role of a resource classroom; thus, the teacher's comments who was leading the tour reinforced a deficit and negative image of the space and the disabled children who spent some of their school time there, which could potentially worsen the bullying situation faced by Lian. The anger Yuchen experienced was an emotional response as a human being (Davies 2015), shared together with the resource teacher when witnessing injustice and harmful practices toward a disabled child they both cared about and felt solidarity with, who had little agency to change her own circumstances in an adult-dominant and ableist environment. Yuchen didn't instruct the resource teacher to intervene right at that moment, though without any discussion in-between, the resource teacher quickly decided by herself to stop the other teacher from making more similar comments in front of Lian's classmates, which countered a deficit narrative about Lian and other disabled

children in the school. Although Yuchen is also Chinese, the research's focus on a minority group of children's experiences, which Imoh (2012) noted as often more aligned with common Western social and political views and an association with a western university when the West is often criticized for using human rights as a form of power politics against China, the teacher positioned Yuchen at a far distance from herself. The outcome of the incident was a sorrowful rupture of relationships instead of a more productive conversation about disability and inclusive practice between Yuchen, the resource teacher, and the teacher who was confronted. Such an outcome seemed to be rather strongly shaped by the teacher's prioritizing of the school community's collective image (the "face") in a Confucian culture (Barbalet 2014) over an individual disabled child's safety and dignity, who was left at the margin of the hierarchical relations in the school.

Emotional challenges and dilemmas are often seen to be inevitable in fieldwork (Punch 2012; Miles et al. 2014). Reflecting on the incident, as childhood researchers who are committed to valuing every child, the emotional unsettlement when witnessing injustice guides us to move beyond a simplistic 'Chinese or western' division of beliefs and practices that researchers should follow one or another when negotiating field relations, to center children's welfare in real life contexts and reconsider how we could possibly draw on the strengths of different sociocultural approaches to support all children while avoiding legitimizing unfairness against some.

Feeling and Negotiating the Child–Adult Relations

Svensson (2006) notes, regarding her fieldwork in China, how the ethical dilemmas and conflicts experienced in the field "related both to the relationship between the fieldworker and people in the field as well as to the relationship between different groups of people in the field" (263). Ethics is viewed as a particularly important element in studies with children (Alderson and Morrow 2011) because they are relatively lacking in power and subordinate in a society dominated by adults' discourse (Gallagher 2009). It has become nearly a prerequisite for Childhood researchers who research children to give very thorough and detailed considerations to how to build rapport and balance power relations with children. When preparing for fieldwork, both of us consulted the abundant literature to configure techniques of how we 'should' act in the field. As suggested by some scholars, because of China's foundation of Confucian-collectivist values (Wang 2011; Yu 2008), the collective orientation and a sense of putting collective *dawo* (great self) before individual *xiaowo* (small self) (Barbalet 2014) reflect Chinese people's understanding of

the relationship between "self" and "others." For example, preserving harmony is thus one of the basic "rules" that guide Chinese people's "interaction manners and norms" (Wei and Li 2013, 62) in everyday relationship management with others (e.g., parents at home, classmates, and teachers at school). In the process of achieving harmony, as most Confucian relationships are hierarchical (Wei and Li 2013), serving and showing obedience to those with higher hierarchical statues to achieve "harmony within hierarchy" is particularly highlighted (Bond and Hwang 1986, 213). Individuals are expected to show "a particular sensitivity [. . .] to the needs and purposes of the other" (Barbalet 2014, 187), especially when "the other" has a higher hierarchical ranking. Furthermore, in hierarchical Confucian relationships, "face" (*mian zi*) is "accorded greater importance for those of higher status and it is up to those with lower status to ensure that the 'face' of one's superiors is upheld" (Tardif and Wan 2001, 306). Therefore, "direct confrontation, contradiction, or refusal" in interpersonal interactions can be regarded as an inharmonious behavior of 'affronting the "face" of a more powerful disputant' (Tardif and Wan 2001, 307). To children, parents and teachers are both significant others with a higher hierarchical status in Confucian ethics. Consequently, for example, in interactions with adults, such as teachers and parents, when disagreement occurs, children might use deliberate approaches to avoid direct conflict (e.g., Yan 2020). Therefore, because of the traditional Confucian-collectivist values, we were particularly worried about to what extent children could feel free in front of us—two adult researchers—who were also likely to be viewed as teachers in such specific school settings.

While teachers in the participating schools would introduce us to children as Teacher Zhu [Yan's surname] or Teacher Wang [Yuchen's surname], when being with children, we defied the teachers with unevenness to ask children to address us much less formally instead, for instance, both of us were called "*jiejie*" (older sister) which would invoke feelings of closeness, warmth, and care. We dressed casually and especially avoided instructing children on what they were supposed to say or do. Common to others, we deliberately tried to differentiate ourselves from teachers (Christensen 2004; Maybin 2005) and become children's "friends" who they could share secrets and have a laugh with, which made us appear to be rather "unusual" adults in a cultural context where children are expected to obey (Kinney 1995). However, for both of us, the processes of setting up the "unusual adults" roles in our fieldwork were similarly challenging and messy. Sometimes, we also doubted if this strategy could really work, especially in the context of Chinese school context, within which the difference between children and adults, as well as the power relations between them, could be complex because of the coexistence of different

sociocultural norms (e.g., individual-oriented, and Confucian-collective-oriented values) in Chinese school settings (Zhu 2021; Hansen 2015). Similar doubt was also raised by local teachers in the fields. For example, as noted by Yan that she once chatted with her gatekeeper about her idea of asking children to call me "*jiejie*" (older sister) rather than "*laoshi*" (teacher). Her gatekeeper laughed, "*are you sure there is a real difference for children between these two ways of calling you?*" and commented, "*the real world is complex in China*" (Yan, Fieldnotes, 28th February 2016). We then recognized that our roles in front of children were like "mosaic," including different aspects and kept shifting.

One of our roles was a role model. It occurred to both of us, with the image of being "achieved and successful" doctoral students, that we were positioned by teachers as some kind of "role models" for children. It was not just us who observed and interpreted children and teachers' actions, they were doing the same. For example, in Yan's fieldnotes, she recorded many scenarios that teachers interpreted her behaviors, such as taking notes continuously, asking questions frequently, and staying in the filed for research from day to night, as examples of her good learning virtues by demonstrating resolve and "*qinfen*" (diligence), "*keku*" (endurance of hardship), "*hengxin*" (perseverance), and *zhuanxin* (concentration) that an "ideal" or "good" learner should have in China society (Li 2009) and therefore encouraged students to learn from her.

> Today's P5(2)'s class meeting used "Reading Day" as the theme. On one PowerPoint slide, there was a quotation, which could be summarised as "if one family has one or more than one doctor, it is the most glory achievement for that family." After reading out this quotation, Teacher Xiong said to the children: 'just like your Yan Jiejie (big-sister) is a doctor, it is very an extraordinary and honourable achievement. You all need to learn from her to become outstanding people in the future to gain glory for your family'. Many children turned to smile at me and nodded their heads. This makes me think that maybe my identity as a PhD candidate with a national scholarship makes me a good role model for children in the Chinese school context—a context that highly emphasises academic performance and values "study" as the most important or even "only one" task for children in schooling. Maybe this identity also makes teachers and parents happy about my presence just like there were a couple of times recently when I eared some conversations about me as a good role model for children between teachers and parents sometimes during Friday lunchtime pick-up time. (Yan, Fieldnotes, 11th April 2016)

It is important to situate and interpret the constructions of childhood within children's immediate social contexts (Bragg and Kehily 2013). In Chinese childhood, moral development (Xu 2017) and academic performance (Zhu

2020) play significant roles. For example, in a series of regulations for primary and middle school students issued by the State Education Commission of the People's Republic of China in 1981, 1991, 1994, 2004, 2012, and 2015, Confucian-collectivist virtues and academic requirements are prominent, such as "filial piety in relationship with parents" (*xiaoshun fumu*), "respect for teachers and elder people" (*zunjing shizhang*), "love for the collective" (*reai jiti*), "solidarity" (*tuanjie*), "Resolve and diligence" (*qinfen*), "endurance of hardship" (*keku*), "perseverance" (*hengxin*). Xu (2014) indicates that in current China society, "personal moral quality and collective moral norms are seen as the ultimate roots and solutions of social crises" (225). Therefore, "becoming a good child" is a topic of moral cultivation, which aims to promote the "belief of perfecting oneself morally and socially," introduced to educate schooling children (ibid.).

Furthermore, Liu (2011) indicates that, as a country with a large population, competition for resources such as social and educational resources tends to be extremely intensive; therefore, "exam serves as the most effective mechanism stratifying young people in China, with great implications for ones' future life chances" (16). It is commonly believed that academic performance could have a knock-on effect on a child and their family's competitive strength during competition for resources through their access to higher education (e.g., university) and job market (e.g., position and salary). The importance of good academic performance could be more prominent for children who are born in a lower social class and want to move up the social class ladder (Dello-Iacovo 2009). In addition, within Chinese Confucian culture, since Chinese family members are conceptualized as "one body" (Kwan 2000, 24)—who are sharing a family's collective face—children's educational success is viewed as a "family business" (Huang and Gove 2015, 44) which matters to both children and their parents. For example, children's educational success could win their parents' glory, while failure could result in losing their parents' face (Schoenhals 2016). In this case, working hard to achieve educational success is not only constructed as the most important task for school-aged children (Dello-Iacovo 2009) but also as "one of the most important filial duties" (Xu 2006, 4). Therefore, educational achievement is traditionally recognized in the society and considered to represent a person's morality (Xu et al. 2006), which plays a significant role in the constructions of "good" Chinese children. Since we both fit into a normative image of being polite, hard-working, and "good" Chinese girls (e.g., Chen and Lau 2021), such identities also seem to contribute to our access to school and relationships with locals. Nevertheless, such positioning made us feel, at times, awkward and uneasy in front of the children. For example, the role of being a role model made Yan felt ashamed when she violated the school's

rules for research purposes. Based on one girl dormitory visit, Yan recorded her concern about her roles:

> My role as a curious researcher, who was excited about being involved in any of the children's in-school activities, sometimes pushed me into even more stressful situations, my desire for rich data leading me to behaviours that violated the school's rules. For example, today, I went to P5(2) girls' dormitory room to play with them but I know that we shouldn't stay and chat in the dormitory room because children are required to return to their classrooms immediately after organizing their belongings in their dormitory rooms each Sunday afternoon. During our time in the dormitory room, sometimes, when we got excited, we were loud. Very often, some children altered that "keep voice down!" or "shh! Watch out, teachers might hear us," etc. When we were in the room, we kept the door closed; sometimes, they quickly but silently run to the door and observed behind it through a narrow crack when they heard footsteps. There was one time, Shuyue heard footsteps but found out that the footsteps came from another student who came back to their dormitory room. Shuyue put her hands on her chest and said "so scary! I thought it was Teacher Fang (the female warden who is always patrolling the girls' dormitory floors)." Jing said "no worries, we are fine since Yan jiejie is here." I asked Jing why it is ok since we are still breaking the school rules (TOGETHER!). Very interesting, not just Jing, other girls also immediately said "no, no, not breaking rules (me or them or all of us? they didn't say!)." I asked why, and they offered different reasons, such as "teachers would not blame me, they will give me 'face' rather than make me 'loss face' in front of students' and they could be excused because their chats and play with me could be referenced as a "part of my research." I feel children have ambivalent ideas about my "roles"—as a sister (half-adult?), different from teachers, but still, an adult who doesn't need to follow rules that children/students need to follow. But they might also not be 100% sure if they would be blamed by their teachers if our play in the dormitory room was discovered. Otherwise, why did they keep reminding the importance of using a lower voice and being altered when heard footsteps? (Yan, Fieldnotes, 10th April 2016)

In Chinese context, *jiejie*, literally means elder sister and is often constructed as someone who could share family's responsibilities (e.g., when parents were busy or away) to care, guide, and project their younger siblings. Such traditional image of being a *jiejie*, especially a good *jiejie*, a role model, who is trusted and permitted to enter school to be with children, automatically set up "behavior rules" for us. Violation of the school's rules apparently went against such rules. Yan then used *fuzui gan*, which means "sense of guilt," in her diary to describe her emotions. She felt that her behaviors of violating school rules made her a bad role model to children, causing disappointment

in herself and even a sense of betrayal in the trust and expectations placed upon her by the parents and teachers.

In addition, this example suggests that, for children, we were both *Sisters* and *Teachers*—the boundary between these dual roles could be blurry, but our adult power and belonging to adults/teachers group seem to be rather hard to be completely altered. Dwyer and Buckle (2009, 60) argued that "holding membership in a group does not denote complete sameness within that group. Likewise, not being a member of a group does not denote complete difference." While managing relations with children is usually explicitly discussed by researchers, the complex relations with adults and children in the schooling context and the impact of deliberate actions to be the "unusual" adults seem to be much less discussed, particularly in a context where relationships is triadic including observers (Herrmann-Pillath 2010).

In sum, although we were trying to perform a role of the "unusual" adults, we were inevitable "accomplices" of a process of "becoming" that assimilates children toward a normative construction of adulthood by being positioned as ideal futures for them. Therefore, we should not be ignorant of how we may still embody cultural values that define and shape child–adult relations—it can be challenging to find a "point of balance" in managing our role as "usual" adults in relationships with teachers and our role as "unusual" adults in relationships with children, especially in each other's presence.

Feeling and Negotiating the Child–Child Relations

As experienced by both authors in their fields, "good" children and "normal" children are prominent in existing norms about Chinese children and childhood. Since schools play a crucial role in the process of foresting Chinese children as the "future builders" (*wei lai de jian she zhe*) and "successor to socialism with Chinese characteristics" (*zhong guo te se she hui zhu yi jie ban ren*),[3] the importance of being "good" and "normal" could be even strengthened. Our extended period of fieldwork and endorsement of a "researching with children" approach enabled us to build trusting relationships with children in the participating schools. We found ourselves being accepted to be with them in spaces which could be usually considered rather private to children themselves. We, therefore, observed peer interactions, which were much less known to teachers in the schools. Apart from the feelings of embarrassment, awkward, and uneasiness in the process of balancing our relationships with children and teachers, we also both experienced guilt and doubts when we were feeling and negotiating the child–child relations in the field, especially in scenarios including marginalized children.

Similar situations also happened in Yan's fieldwork. Since the norms of "making 'good' friends" were significant among children as the key friends-making rule taught by their parents and teachers (Zhu 2020), children who are not categorized as 'good children' easily experienced exclusion and marginalization at school (Zhu 2019). For example, children in most Chinese schools, including Yan's fieldwork school, are required to do most school tasks as groups—therefore, each child should belong to one working group in class. Such working group model is closely linked with children's individual and working group's collective performance at school through the points-earning and ranking competition system—each child's good or bad performance could affect the points not only in the child's own record but also in his/her working group's record (see also Bakken 2000 and Zhu 2019). Since children were encouraged to do self-grouping for the purpose of democracy, in this case, Yan at times witnessed some children with poor academic performance or difficult behaviors were rejected by all working groups in the grouping process or were "expelled" by their current working groups. Once a child was excluded from the grouping process, very likely the child would begin to cry and ask the teacher to intervene. As described above, because children couldn't entirely distinguish her from "teacher," Yan was approached by several excluded children, requiring her to intervene. However, because of her hesitation in intervening in children's peer interactions, Yan guiltily found herself always missing the "key point" to react in an emotionally desirable way to intervene (e.g., not just to comfort excluded children but also to tell other children it is wrong to marginalize peers). She even felt herself contributed to the process of othering among children to construct children with poor academic performance or difficult behaviors as "out group" at school, who are "strange, un-familiar and different in contrast to the in-group, which is favored" (Eriksson et al. 2012, 11).

When we are reflecting on our regrets, we recognize an ethical dilemma: If guided by our emotions, we would have said to those children who teased or marginalized other peers to stop; however, we were compelled by the ethics regulation of causing no distress to children. To avoid potentially upsetting them, we didn't intervene directly, though we shared our concerns about teasing, bullying, and exclusion with teachers later. However, our "inaction" during those particular moments may have inevitably reinforced ableism, marginalization, and exclusion among children. For example, in Yuchen's case, If Lian continued to be subjected to prolonged impact of bullying, how could this be viewed as a more desirable outcome of an "ethical" decision? Drawing on McIntosh and Morse (2009) and King (2021)'s reflections on ethics and emotions, we argue that researchers must recognize participants and themselves as beings involved in person-to-person relations and maintain

genuine moral, affective, and emotional sensitivity and responsivity to actively display care, compassion, and empathy.

Conclusion

Identities always flow like water and are socially constructed in specific contexts. In the field, researchers' identities—both individual identities and social identities—could be exposed and even amplified; therefore, researchers always need to cope with multiple roles in ethnographic fieldwork. In this paper, we revisited some of the significant moments of our fieldwork experiences in researching diverse groups of children in Chinese schooling contexts through the lens of emotional reflexivity. It is like the reflection shared by Eriksson (2012) that, through fieldnotes, we also recognize "how our social identities and the respective language and concepts that we use, the theories we draw from, and the academic practices we engage in construct (and enable) our understanding of the world" (20). We were deliberately attentive to those complex emotional experiences that were shaping the coexistence of "sameness" and "otherness" in our relationships with participants and made an attempt to "write academically and emotionally about emotions" (Holmes 2010, 139) as we reconsidered the additional lessons we learned from our fieldwork beyond previous accounts. The analysis contested simplified assumptions about field relations in school-based childhood research in international contexts and provided further insights into the complexity and diversity of emotional experiences and interactions between participants and researchers. Unpacking our vulnerability and interpreting complex emotions shed light on how researchers and participants both feel the structures and positionings; thus, the process of exercising emotional reflexivity can also be productive for knowledge construction. Although it would be an overstatement to solely attribute our experiences to "Chinese culture" (e.g., Confucian cultural heritage), because the ambivalent adult-child relationship is common in much research involving adults attempting to adopt a child-like perspective in studying children in a school setting, our emotional reflexivity has indeed revealed the significant impact of context on relationships and guided our actions in the field and for future research plans. Our reflexive analysis suggests that childhood researchers need to recognize the potential of using emotions as a pathway to enable co-construction and interactive emotional reflexivity between researchers and participants. In particular, bringing emotions into the reflexivity practice could be an effective strategy to increase the ethical rigor to help ensure researchers' sensitivity toward ethical dilemmas and inform our actions in fieldwork in the Global South contexts.

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Notes

1. "*Fu chuji*" (副处级) is a bureaucratic term that refers to a bureaucratic grade held by some government officials, such as County Vice-director.
2. Education inspection is known to be a tool to reinforce both Communism and neoliberalism in Chinese schools (Tian 2021; Tsang 2000).
3. See Some Opinions of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Further Intensifying and Improving the Ideological and Ethical Construction of Minors (No. 8 [2004] of the CPC Central Committee).

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