Doing ethics without a 'Map': How Chinese researchers develop ethical awareness in research with children

Kaidong Guo [a] , Yan Zhu [a] , Jie Gao [a] , Yuwei Xu [b,*] , Yuchen Wang [c] , Xiao Qu [d]

[a] UCL Institute of Education, University College London, London, UK
[b] School of Education, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK
[c] Strathclyde Institute of Education, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK
[d] School of Education and Social Sciences, University of the West of Scotland, London, UK

A B S T R A C T

This paper explores how researchers working with children in China navigate ethical challenges in the contexts of limited institutional guidance and the tension between global ethical principles and local moral expectations. Drawing on dialogic focus groups with 30 Chinese participants who have experience doing research with children, we conceptualise ethics not as compliance with rules but as an interplay of ethical awareness and practice shaped by affective, relational, and institutional conditions. Ethical awareness is theorised as a situated and relational capacity to recognise and respond to morally important moments under uncertainty. It develops through hesitation, discomfort and negotiation, particularly within ethical double binds between procedural frameworks and relational obligations. Rather than advancing a culturalist model, our paper offers a practice-based perspective that foregrounds ambiguity, moral complexity and the emotional labour of ethical decision-making. We argue for moving beyond universalist paradigms towards dialogic and context-sensitive approaches to research ethics. The paper concludes with implications for researchers, ethics committees and institutions seeking to foster reflexive and decolonising practices in cross-cultural qualitative inquiry.

1. Introduction

In research with children, ethical questions have become increasingly central, particularly in cross-cultural contexts where normative assumptions about childhood, consent and participation often clash. Dominant frameworks, such as those derived from the UNCRC (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child), prioritise individual autonomy, procedural justice and standardised documentation (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012). Yet in many non-Western contexts, relational obligations, communal responsibilities and hierarchical protection may take precedence (Faulkner & Nyamutata, 2020).

In response to these tensions, scholars have proposed various strategies to negotiate global ethical frameworks with local values. One dominant strand, procedural ethics, emphasises codified rules, informed consent and risk management through institutional review processes (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Over time, however, procedural ethics has diversified as scholars recognise the need for context-sensitive and relational interpretations that go beyond bureaucratic compliance (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Sikes, 2013; Guta

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et al., 2013; Boden et al., 2009). Yet even these expanded frameworks often provide limited space for navigating the uncertainties of everyday research, particularly in under-regulated or rapidly changing contexts (e.g., China) where researchers must make moral decisions before institutional guidance is available.

To address these limits, many have turned to reflexive ethics, which emphasises ongoing critical examination of researchers' positionality, emotions and reasoning in real-life contexts (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Sikes, 2013; Zhu & Wang, 2024). While this approach recognises ethics as dynamic and processual, we argue that even highly reflexive researchers remain caught in ambiguities that no framework can fully anticipate. In such contexts, ethical judgement becomes less a matter of compliance and more a situated practice of moral negotiation.

This paper therefore explores how researchers in China perceive, interpret and respond to ethical dilemmas in these moments of uncertainty, conceptualising this process as the development of ethical awareness - a relational and affective capacity to sense, interpret and negotiate ethical tension in practice. We focus on the Chinese context, where ethical infrastructures are unevenly developed and where social norms are informed by Confucian hierarchies, adult authority and collective familial obligations (Wang, 2019). These conditions generate not only practical challenges but also conceptual questions about how ethical awareness takes shape in research with children: how researchers interpret rights, responsibilities and relational obligations amid ambiguous institutional and cultural guidance.

To investigate these questions, we designed a dialogic research platform with 30 participants experienced in research with children in China, who reflected collectively on ethical dilemmas in their work. Rather than seeking consensus, the goal was to understand how researchers negotiate ethical decision-making amid uncertainty and asymmetrical power relations. While existing scholarship has exposed the limits of normative frameworks, little is known about how researchers actually develop ethical awareness in practice. Our empirical study addresses this gap through the following question: how do childhood researchers in China develop ethical awareness when local frameworks are incomplete or conflicting?

Instead of proposing a culturally specific ethical framework for the Chinese context, we explore how ethics unfolds through researchers' ethical awareness and relational judgement. We focus on the lived processes through which researchers confront multiple ethical frameworks, negotiate obligations and sustain trust within asymmetrical power relations. By highlighting complication and uncertainty as integral to these practices, we reframe inaction, discomfort and ambivalence not as signs of ethical failure but as generative conditions for negotiating context-sensitive ethics. In so doing, our paper contributes to global debates on research ethics by offering a practice-based and decolonising perspective. It demonstrates how ethical awareness emerges through affective, relational and institutional entanglements rather than through universal prescriptions. In dialogue with participatory and children's rights approaches (e.g. Lundy, 2007; Liebel, 2023), we argue that ethical awareness bridges procedural and relational ethics, linking institutional accountability with situated judgement. Our dialogic focus groups thus became a collective reflexive space where participants surfaced shared ethical double binds, articulated hesitation and co-developed tentative strategies, illustrating how research design itself can function as an ethical practice that fosters shared reflexivity and collaborative care.

2. Literature review

2.1. Dominant ethical frameworks and their limitations

Research ethics have been shaped by landmark documents such as the Nuremberg Code (1947), the Declaration of Helsinki (1964) and the Belmont Report (1979), which prioritise informed consent, respect for autonomy and protection from harm (Gallagher et al., 2010; Guta et al., 2013). Although originally developed in biomedical contexts, these principles have become institutionalised across the social sciences, extending their reach into qualitative and childhood research. However, their global diffusion often carries Western-centric assumptions about individualism, rational choice and standardised procedures, which risk marginalising alternative ethical epistemologies (Halse & Honey, 2007; Smith, 2021).

In research with children, the global rights-based and participatory turn, anchored in Article 12 of the UNCRC, has made participation a central ethical principle. Lundy's (2007) model of space, voice, audience and influence provides a clear framework for translating this right into practice. While widely adopted, its institutional application often risks becoming procedural: participation is demonstrated through measurable 'voice' rather than through relational or contextual engagement (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012). As Lundy and McEvoy (2012) and Liebel and Budde (2023) note, such proceduralism can obscure the affective and situated dimensions of children's participation, particularly in non-Western contexts. These limitations reflect a broader tension within global ethical governance: as universal models travel across cultures, they confront diverse moral orders and relational expectations. Hence, rather than rejecting rights-based models, scholars call for re-situating them within local moral and institutional terrains where participation is negotiated and made meaningful.

Beyond childhood research, in cross-cultural contexts procedural ethics frequently prove inadequate. Informed consent can clash with local relational norms: collective decision-making in Tonga or the involvement of household elders in India make individual consent culturally inappropriate (Morrow, 2013; Dayal et al., 2018). Scholars working in Indigenous and Global South settings have shown that document-centred ethics can foster fear or mistrust (Kennedy & Cram, 2010; Calia et al., 2022). As Hammersley (2009) notes, procedural paradigms may produce ethical risks rather than guarantee protection; ethical legitimacy often depends on relational attentiveness to hierarchy, obligation and care.

In response, several approaches have sought to negotiate universal principles with local contexts. Cultural sensitivity modifies Western procedures, such as adopting verbal consent or involving local gatekeepers (Calia et al., 2022). Cultural responsiveness emphasises reciprocity and participant empowerment (O' Neill et al., 2017). Reflexive ethics promotes continuous moral attentiveness

and accountability (Gallagher et al., 2010; Allen, 2009). While these approaches expand procedural boundaries, they often remain constrained by institutional logics. Culturally sensitive ethics may reproduce existing hierarchies (Kouritzin & Nakagawa, 2018), and reflexivity can become instrumentalised as a rhetorical sign of ethical credibility (Boden et al., 2009). Even participatory and rights-based frameworks remain structurally unsupported in many Global South contexts, where ethical infrastructures are fragmented and unevenly enforced (Sagitova et al., 2024).

China's research context exemplifies these tensions. Although awareness of children's rights and research ethics has grown among scholars, there remains no nationally recognised or certified framework for conducting ethical research with children (Wang, 2015; Yang et al., 2020). In practice, ethical responsibility often depends on researchers' individual discretion, as institutional review systems are unevenly implemented across universities and disciplines. Many studies continue to omit ethics statements, reflecting limited training, weak supervision and the absence of standardised publication requirements (Wang, 2015). Attempts to adapt Western ethical frameworks locally have rarely resolved these gaps; instead, they often produce procedural workarounds that emphasise self-monitoring and performative compliance rather than substantive ethical reflection (Katyal, 2011).

Moreover, China's collectivist and hierarchical social norms complicate the operationalisation of global (and oftentimes Western) standards. In contexts where maintaining harmony and deference to authority are valued, children's consent and withdrawal rights are often negotiated through adults, parents, teachers or local officials, rather than granted individually (Wu & Cree, 2022; Katyal, 2011). These dynamics are not unique to China but exemplify how global ethical frameworks intersect with local moral orders. As Vandenhole (2020) argues, balancing universality and particularism is crucial to avoid both liberal universalism and uncritical relativism. Taken together, these patterns reveal how the translation of dominant Western ethical paradigms into non-Western settings often reproduces proceduralism and ethical ambiguity, emphasising the need for more relational and context-sensitive approaches to research ethics.

2.2. Structural ethics as disciplinary power

Although primarily designed to protect research integrity, ethical regulations have also been recognised as technologies of governance embedded in asymmetrical power relations (Sikes, 2013; Guta et al., 2013). While such systems rightly aim to protect participants and ensure accountability, their implementation often extends beyond protection into modes of bureaucratic control. Drawing on Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, critical scholars argue that ethical review systems do not simply regulate research but also produce compliant academic subjects through routinised surveillance and documentation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Through committees, forms and audit trails, researchers are socialised into demonstrating ethical legitimacy via procedural correctness rather than moral reflection (Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2007; Boden et al., 2009). As Boden et al. (2009) observe, such bureaucratisation transforms ethics into a form of epistemic governance, where conformity replaces reflexivity.

These systems operate through a proliferation of procedural tools, such as consent form templates, data management protocols and standardised risk assessment procedures, that discipline not only research practice but also researcher subjectivity (Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2007; Boden et al., 2009; Guta et al., 2013). Ethical accountability is often evidenced through paperwork rather than relational reasoning, positioning participants as 'protected objects' and researchers as custodians of universal moral codes (Guta et al., 2013). The outcome is a moral economy in which visibility, rather than care, guarantees legitimacy. Yet, as Hammett et al. (2022) remind us, procedural ethics also perform valuable communicative and protective functions, particularly where public trust in research is fragile. The challenge, then, is not to dismiss oversight but to balance its protective aims with space for situated moral reasoning. Sagitova et al. (2024) further note that in emerging research contexts proceduralisation often exports Western bureaucratic models under the banner of capacity building, reproducing dependency on Northern epistemic authority.

The institutionalisation of ethics has established particular ways of defining truth and has obscured the geopolitical inequalities that shape global research practices. Even when ethics frameworks are adapted to local contexts, they often remain grounded in Western assumptions about autonomy, consent and risk (Kouritzin & Nakagawa, 2018). As Holliday (2013) and Faulkner and Nyamutata (2020) note, such frameworks may inadvertently reproduce forms of ethical dominance, as researchers in the Global South continue to follow established procedural expectations to meet international standards of legitimacy.

However, to treat researchers solely as subjects of discipline would miss the complexity of ethical practice on the ground. Boden et al. (2009) and Hammett (2022) show that many researchers navigate between compliance and resistance, completing necessary paperwork while quietly reinterpreting rules to fit their situated contexts. Such acts constitute forms of micro-resistance and situated ethical judgement. For instance, ethics forms may be submitted retrospectively to satisfy procedural requirements, while actual ethical reasoning takes place through informal consent during fieldwork (Wu, 2022). These tactical adaptations reveal how researchers translate abstract ethical codes into contextually meaningful practices within constrained institutional landscapes.

Recognising these micro-negotiations shifts the analytic focus from institutional ethics to what Guillemin and Gillam (2004) call ethics in practice, the moral work that unfolds amid uncertainty and emotional tension. Rather than a static system of rules, ethics becomes a dynamic field of power, affect and judgement, where researchers must balance bureaucratic demands, cultural expectations and personal convictions. As the ERIC framework (2024) suggests, bridging rights-based and relational ethics requires recognising that accountability and care are not opposites but interdependent. In this light, the focus is not to abolish ethical oversight but to acknowledge its limits and to foreground the reflexive capacities through which researchers make sense of and work within such constraints.

In sum, dominant paradigms, whether procedural, culturally sensitive or reflexive, offer important ethical safeguards but continue to reflect hierarchical assumptions about knowledge and moral universality. Attempts to adapt these frameworks to local contexts often reproduce the same asymmetries they aim to challenge, leading to practices of self-regulation. However, less attention has been paid to how researchers make ethical decisions when existing frameworks fall short and when neither institutional rules nor cultural

norms provide clear guidance. Our paper examines this question empirically, focusing on how Chinese researchers cultivate ethical awareness through hesitation, negotiation and relational engagement within overlapping moral and institutional settings.

3. Methodology

To explore how Chinese researchers exercise ethical judgement in the absence of clear ethical frameworks when working with children, we conducted a qualitative study centred on their lived ethical practices. 30 participants were recruited through the Peekaboo Forum, a public platform for childhood research in China. They included early-years educators, NGO and social workers, academic researchers and postgraduate students, all with direct experience of child-related research. Participants were organised into small online focus groups (10–15 participants per group, 2–3 groups per session, 6 themed sessions - see next paragraph) to enable interactive discussion and reflection on how ethical negotiations unfold in their work within China's socio-cultural context. This professional and disciplinary diversity was central to our epistemological approach. As Alcoff (1991) argues, social location and institutional positioning shape both knowledge production and ethical engagement. Participants came from sociology, education, psychology and anthropology, and differed in their exposure to formal ethics training. These contrasts provided insight into how ethical awareness is negotiated and how global norms are interpreted, challenged or reconfigured in local practice.

The online focus groups were held via Tencent Meeting to accommodate participants' schedules and align with our commitment to relational ethics. Focus groups allow researchers to observe how ethical tensions emerge and evolve through real-time interaction (Acocella, 2012). Unlike individual interviews, they create a dialogic space in which moral frameworks are co-constructed through disagreement, reflection and collective sense-making (Dimitrakopoulou, 2021). Each 60-minute session was guided by thematic prompts, such as research with migrant or left-behind children, children with disabilities and early childhood, encouraging multi-dimensional dialogue and collaborative reflection on how ethical dilemmas are encountered and navigated in practice.

The focus groups were facilitated by the authors, who are bilingual Chinese researchers with extensive qualitative fieldwork experience in both China and the United Kingdom. Familiar with ethics review systems in both contexts, we were struck by how unfamiliar many Chinese researchers found formal procedures and the language of ethics review. This contrast between institution-alised and emergent ethics provided the initial motivation for the study. Our dual positionality, shaped by international training and local embeddedness, influenced both group dynamics and data interpretation. As insider-outsiders, we approached discussions with empathy and critical attentiveness, aiming to create a space where diverse perspectives could surface and situated reasoning could unfold.

All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were analysed in NVivo following a critical qualitative approach guided by an 'ethics in practice' perspective (Guillemin & Heggen, 2004), which views ethics as relational and situated throughout the research process. Using an inductive and iterative coding strategy (Madison, 2020), we first conducted open coding to identify recurring ideas such as children's voices, authority, informed consent and institutional hierarchies, and then developed higher-order themes. This process revealed tensions between formal ethics and local norms and highlighted the emotional labour of ethical decision-making - feelings of guilt, hesitation and helplessness. Many participants also described efforts to build an 'ethical community': a decentralised, collective mode of negotiation operating beyond formal review structures.

The study received approval from UCL's Institute of Education Research Ethics Committee. All participants provided written informed consent and were briefed on the study's aims, data use and confidentiality. To reduce power asymmetries related to academic seniority, participants were allowed to keep their cameras off, and pseudonyms were used in all transcripts. Given the cross-linguistic nature of the study, particular attention was paid to the ethical and interpretive challenges of translation. All discussions were conducted and analysed in Chinese to preserve contextual nuance. Quotations were translated into English by the first author, a bilingual researcher attuned to both cultural and academic registers. Translation was treated as a situated interpretive process (Temple & Young, 2004), with key terms collaboratively discussed to ensure conceptual and affective integrity.

4. Findings

This section presents the empirical findings to explore how researchers working with children in China develop and experience ethical awareness in practice. The lack of a national ethical framework does not indicate an absence of ethics; rather, researchers work between the symbolic authority of global standards and the moral expectations embedded in local hierarchies. These intersecting pressures often produce ethical double binds, where meeting one set of expectations may conflict with another. In this context, ethical awareness arises through hesitation, discomfort and situated negotiation rather than through adherence to fixed rules. The analysis therefore focuses not on explicit violations of ethical codes but on the subtle moments when researchers recognise tension and improvise moral responses within institutional and cultural constraints.

4.1. Adult-Centred norms and the silencing of doubt

Ethical unease often arose not through explicit dilemmas but through participant researchers' implicit assumption that adult authority, whether from teachers or parents, naturally aligned with children's best interests. Within this moral framework, children's reluctance or distress was rarely regarded as ethically significant. Participants described subtle dissonance when institutional routines or adult-led decisions clashed with children's responses - moments marking the earliest stirrings of ethical awareness. These were not framed as critique or resistance but were felt as hesitation, uncertainty or a vague sense that something was amiss.

Qiao, a university-based researcher, described how she was immediately positioned as an expert upon entering a school for her

project. A staff member told her, 'As an expert, your work requires our special support.' Teachers selected participants and introduced her as 'a guest from the university', reinforcing hierarchies that discouraged child agency. Even when children showed reluctance, teachers ensured their participation. Qiao recalled, 'At the time, we didn't ask the children for their opinions.' She later reflected that adult approval from institutional figures was assumed to be both ethically sufficient and practically necessary. This substitution of adult consent for children's voices exemplifies a broader, internalised ethical order in which legitimacy flows downward from adults to children. When asked if she had considered intervening, Qiao admitted her discomfort but felt unable to challenge the authority of teachers within the school. Institutional norms and practical constraints made adult approval appear both necessary and sufficient. As she explained, gaining the support of gatekeepers was not merely a procedural step; it also served as her ethical rationale for involving children.

Qiao's research design offered little room for children to meaningfully assent or dissent. Teachers managed access, chose participants, and legitimised her role as a visiting expert. Children's passive acceptance was taken as implied consent under a logic rooted in hierarchical authority rather than autonomy. Similar dynamics appeared across participants' accounts, where teacher-mediated recruitment was seen as 'convenient' or 'efficient'. Such practices reflect a deeply embedded ethical order in which adult endorsement stands in for child participation. Yet it would be reductive to interpret these arrangements purely as ethical failures. In contexts where care and responsibility are understood to flow from adults to children, legitimacy is culturally grounded in adult representation and protection, not necessarily in child voice.

Although Qiao's case shows how structural norms affirm adult authority, Ning's experience further complicates the relationship between care and harm. A decade earlier, she had worked on a university intervention programme involving children with autism. Although framed as a developmental benefit and offered free of charge, many children cried and resisted participation in the unfamiliar environment. Parents insisted the programme was beneficial. 'At the time, hardly anyone considered the children's wishes,' Ning recalled. 'We genuinely believed it was for their own good.' She remembered feeling uneasy but unsure how to act differently: 'We didn't really know how else to do it.' Parental consent was treated as sufficient, and children's distress was not recognised as ethically meaningful. This logic echoed dominant cultural norms in which elders determine what is best (Zhang, 2018). Neither researchers nor parents questioned this arrangement.

Her later reflections did not come as sudden insight but as a gradual clarification of long-held discomfort. Revisiting the experience during the focus group prompted her to reassess her assumptions: 'That forced participation,' she admitted, 'was deeply emotionally shocking and harmful for the children.' The unease she described was not about violating formal ethics but about a clash between good intentions and visible harm: 'Our certainty about what was good for the children clashed with the unavoidable harm. How should we reconcile that?' These reflections emerged through shared dialogue. The focus group offered a space where Ning could name what had previously been only felt. As others recounted similar dilemmas, she developed language to distinguish between proxy consent and genuine willingness, between perceived benefit and actual harm.

Ning's account suggests that ethical awareness often emerges not through open conflict or deliberate resistance but through moments of emotional tension and shared reflection. Rather than reaching a clear resolution, her experience marked the beginning of an ongoing ethical development, a gradual, affective process through which moral sensitivity is formed in relation to others. In this sense, ethical becoming refers not to a fixed moral stance but to a continuous process of responsiveness, in which discomfort is recognised, discussed and given meaning.

These accounts do not present Chinese researchers as ethically indifferent but as working within a complex network of relational obligations and social expectations. Their experiences indicate that ethical awareness often develops not from formal principles or rights-based frameworks but from moments of internal tension, when ideas of care, consent and harm come into conflict. As illustrated by the cases of Qiao and Ning, this awareness rarely takes the form of explicit resistance to social norms; instead, it emerges through subtle unease within hierarchical consent arrangements. In both cases, adult approval, whether from teachers or parents, was regarded as morally legitimate and procedurally sufficient (Katyal & King, 2014), while children's discomfort remained unspoken and largely unacknowledged in ethical terms (Leung et al., 2011).

This form of ethical reasoning is grounded in cultural understandings of caregiving and protection, where moral responsibility is assumed to rest with adults and to be directed towards children (Wu & Cree, 2022). Within this framework, ethical legitimacy depends on the provision of care rather than the negotiation of consent. In Chinese culture, children are often regarded as insufficiently mature to make independent decisions (Zhang, 2018), and their well-being is defined and managed by adults (Yu, 2015). Researchers, like parents and teachers, are expected to emphasise long-term benefits over immediate preferences, sustaining a moral order in which obedience and protection are closely linked to the idea of care.

In these moral contexts, discomfort often remains unspoken, not as a clear violation but as a subtle gap between intention and outcome. Adult-led decisions are routinely justified as being in children's best interests, even when they cause visible distress. Teachers, for instance, viewed securing participation as part of their duty to maintain order and promote well-being. Consulting children was sometimes seen as unnecessary or even disruptive. When faced with global frameworks that emphasise autonomy and consent, participant researchers rarely expressed direct criticism. Instead, they described an intuitive unease, a sense that something was wrong even when they lacked the language or authority to act. Ethical awareness therefore appeared through hesitation and delayed reflection rather than active resistance.

Understanding these experiences requires reconsidering what is meant by ethics in research. As Sagitova et al. (2024) argue in their study of Central Asian researchers, ethics extends beyond procedural compliance or institutional review. It is shaped as a moral orientation based on values such as honesty, responsibility, respect and care. In contexts with limited institutional infrastructure, researchers' ethical judgement is guided less by formal rules than by embodied sensibilities developed through practice. This perspective aligns with our participants' accounts, where ethics was expressed through patience, attentiveness and relational

responsibility rather than ethical regulation.

Amid these tensions, some participants began to re-evaluate their place within adult-child hierarchies. One participant who had conducted long-term fieldwork with rural children reflected: 'When you truly recognise the legitimacy of children's voices, you gradually lower your stance and become a learner. You start thinking differently about how to ask questions, how to collect data, how to speak with them.' This transformation did not result from institutional requirements but from an evolving ethical practice shaped through everyday encounters. Gradually, he noticed that children spoke more freely, not because consent was formally negotiated, but because trust was built through sustained presence. Such moments reveal ethical awareness as ongoing efforts: the ongoing, attentive work of care through which moral understanding is cultivated under constraint.

4.2. Caught in contradictions: emotional struggle under conflicting norms

Ethical awareness seldom develops through deliberate reasoning or leads directly to action. It often emerges as a sense of unease, moments of hesitation or tension that arise unexpectedly and remain unresolved. Participants described being positioned between institutional expectations and personal relationships, recognising that 'something was ethically problematic but unsure how to respond'. These situations generated a strong sense of struggle: participants perceived the potential for harm yet lacked the authority, language or supportive environment to intervene. Rather than indicating ethical failure, such experiences highlight how responsibility, hierarchy and care intersect within the structural constraints of everyday research. This section explores instances where awareness deepened without resulting in immediate action. Conflicting norms created emotional strain rather than clarity. The Chinese researchers discussed here were not ethically detached; their sensitivity often intensified the dilemma, as speaking out or refusing could jeopardise professional or relational connections.

These tensions were often heightened through transnational encounters. For some researchers, exposure to Western ethical paradigms, especially during overseas training, became a source of enduring moral discomfort. Luo, who completed part of her PhD in Australia, recalled being 'shocked' by the rigour of institutional ethics. Watching her supervisor submit multiple rounds of applications for child-related research led her to view Western systems as more legitimate. Upon returning to China, this comparison prompted her to scrutinise her own methods and identify what she called 'ethical lapses'. Although this heightened her awareness, it also left her uncertain: 'Now I pay much more attention to ethics,' she reflected, 'but sometimes I still don't know the right way to do it in the Chinese context.'

Lin, who conducted fieldwork in a Scottish kindergarten, experienced a similar awakening. Although she had obtained permission from the principal, a classroom teacher insisted that the children themselves should also be asked. 'In China,' Lin admitted, 'I rarely consider the children's opinions.' The encounter prompted her to reconsider earlier habits, which she later described, half jokingly and half with guilt, as 'collecting data like a gangster'. Her self-deprecating humour carried a serious undertone. By invoking the image of a 'gangster', Lin positioned herself as morally illegitimate in the eyes of an imagined global audience. The joke revealed a deeper politics of self-regulation shaped by transnational hierarchies of knowledge and morality. In this sense, her reflection illustrates what Liebel (2023) describes as the colonisation of the mind, the tendency of researchers in the Global South to evaluate their moral adequacy through imported procedural ideals. Rather than rejecting these ideals, both Luo and Lin internalised them as ethical mirrors, translating external expectations into self-discipline. What began as admiration for 'global standards' evolved into self-surveillance and moral doubt.

Through publication expectations, academic mobility and transnational training, audit-oriented logics exert symbolic power, casting locally grounded practices as ethically inferior (Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2007; Boden et al., 2009). As a result, what begins as admiration for such standards may evolve into self-surveillance and moral doubt. Although Western scholarship has advanced relational and participatory ethics (Lundy, 2007; Gallagher et al., 2010; Liebel & Budde, 2023), procedural accountability nevertheless continues to structure how ethical legitimacy is evidenced and rewarded across settings (Ethical Research Involving Children [ERIC], 2024; Sagitova et al., 2024). Even when not formally imposed, these benchmarks linger as aspirations, subtly reconfiguring what counts as ethical and whose ethics are deemed credible.

Hence, the global circulation of ethical ideals can turn reflexivity into conformity, creating pressure to meet abstract standards of 'good ethics'. Under these symbolic expectations, locally grounded practices are rarely recognised as legitimate alternatives and are instead viewed as lapses or deviations. The principle of do no harm remains a shared ethical aspiration across contexts, yet, as ERIC (2024) and Liebel and Budde (2023) remind us, what counts as harm and how it is prevented depend on situated relations, infrastructures and cultural norms. This argument is not meant to dismiss the value of global ethical principles. Rather, it highlights how their symbolic authority can obscure other ways of reasoning about ethics, ways rooted in relational care, contextual sensitivity and culturally informed negotiation.

Luo's ethical unease crystallised during fieldwork when she attempted to apply the child-friendly consent procedures learned from her overseas training. She introduced simplified consent forms and sought verbal assent from children, steps that aligned with her internalised view of ethics as individualised and child-centred. Her host teacher quickly dismissed these practices: 'As long as I've approved it, the children can go ahead.' Like Qiao, who relied on teacher-led recruitment, Luo encountered institutional authority that subsumed children's voices. Yet for Luo, the clash was not merely procedural; it reopened tensions between two ethical systems she now straddled.

Challenging the teacher's position was not straightforward. Luo depended on the teacher's cooperation to conduct her research, and questioning her judgement could risk damaging that relationship. The teacher's response was also expressed in a caring and responsible tone, reflecting a culturally normative view of adult authority. To oppose it would have meant challenging not only an institutional rule but a moral order grounded in respect and relational harmony. Torn between children's autonomy and the need to

maintain trust with gatekeepers, Luo experienced a clear sense of ethical tension: 'In that kind of situation, it's hard to say no.'

Her struggle, however, did not amount to passive compliance. Aware of her limited room for manoeuvre, Luo made subtle adjustments during data collection. She attuned herself to children's facial expressions and bodily cues, using these signals to gauge comfort and change her approach. These quiet, relational tactics became her way of practising care under constraint. Her hesitation exemplifies the wider ethical double bind: researchers are pulled between competing moral logics, with no clearly safe or correct response. Luo's inaction was not neglect but a manifestation of structural conflict; when globalised ideals and local norms collide, action itself becomes ethically fraught.

The tension between popular ideals of research ethics and culturally embedded authority also appeared in other researchers' accounts, though in different forms. Mei's experience illustrates how efforts to reduce hierarchy can generate new tensions. An experienced educator conducting fieldwork at her own primary school, she tried to appear approachable by asking students to call her by her first name and by presenting herself as a sister to weaken uneven power relations. Yet the gesture backfired. Some children said it felt wrong to address a teacher that way. 'I felt like a barrier suddenly appeared between us,' she recalled. Their honest response left her uncertain. This episode shows that ethical sensitivity requires attentiveness to cultural codes as much as to ideals of equality. The children's discomfort was not resistance to openness but reflected norms of respect and relational order. Asking what children themselves preferred, how they wanted to address her and why, might have turned tension into dialogue. In this sense, ethical awareness involves balancing abstract ideals of mutuality with the particular expectations guiding everyday interaction.

Lilly's reflections illustrate how ethical uncertainty can emerge when researchers face disclosures they are not equipped to address. In her study of Chinese adolescents' experiences of sex education, participants occasionally mentioned sexual or domestic violence. Although these topics were beyond her research focus, she initially regarded them as significant. As her ethical awareness developed, however, she began to avoid them intentionally. 'It felt wrong to skip them,' she recalled, 'but I didn't know how to handle it.' Her hesitation stemmed from concern about misrepresenting participants, re-traumatising them or unintentionally causing harm. 'If my interviewee says he has experienced sexual or domestic violence,' she asked, 'what should I do? I can only say that if I encounter related problems, I will report to my university.' With no mandatory reporting policy and no locally adapted procedures, she felt limited in her response. In this case, ethical awareness took the form of restraint and uncertainty, the effort to care responsibly when clear guidance was absent.

Across the experiences of Luo, Lin and Mei, a common pattern can be observed: their ethical awareness was not lacking but heightened by the conflicting demands and constraints they faced. Silence, hesitation and self-questioning should not be read as ethical failure but as forms of care exercised under limitation. As Allen (2009) notes, applying universal principles without attention to context can itself cause harm. The teachers, children and families they engaged with were situated within culturally specific moral frameworks, making the application of external ethical standards both complex and contested.

In this light, inaction can be understood as an ethical response rather than an absence of care. It represents awareness constrained by structural and relational conditions. Dominant ethical frameworks, particularly those grounded in universalist assumptions, tend to equate awareness with agency and to expect that clarity should lead to action. The researchers' experiences, however, reveal a more complex reality in which ethical decision-making is shaped by institutional hierarchies, dependencies and implicit cultural norms. What is needed, therefore, are not additional rules but approaches that recognise uncertainty, enable situated judgement and value relational forms of care. In this way, ethical awareness can move from being a personal burden to becoming a shared, culturally situated practice.

These tensions are neither specific to China nor reducible to a simple contrast between 'Western' proceduralism and 'Chinese' relationality. Scholarship in the Global North has also developed participatory, relational and rights-based approaches that emphasise care, dialogue and children's agency (Lundy, 2007; Gallagher et al., 2010; Liebel & Budde, 2023). Yet across contexts, systems of ethical review, funding and publication continue to prioritise procedural accountability and documentary proof. The experiences discussed here thus speak to a wider transnational tension between relational ethics as an aspiration and proceduralisation as a dominant mode of governance.

Taken together, these findings prompt a broader consideration of what 'ethics' means in research with children. Across participants' accounts, ethics involved several interrelated dimensions: the procedural (rules and institutional oversight), the relational (attentiveness, reciprocity, care) and the personal or virtue-based (honesty, patience, responsibility). To act ethically was understood as developing moral sensitivity and practical judgement within constraint rather than simply complying with formal requirements. Ethics is therefore approached here as a situated practice, an ongoing moral awareness negotiated through power, emotion and relationship, rather than a universal code of conduct (ERIC, 2024; Hammett et al., 2022).

5. Discussion and conclusion

In recent years, scholars and practitioners have called for culturally sensitive ethical frameworks in research with children, particularly in non-Western contexts (Liebel & Markowska-Manista, 2023). Such calls for cultural adaptation are valuable, yet they sometimes imply that ethical norms can be localised while overlooking the power relations that underlie them. As Liebel and Budde (2023) remind us, universal ethical frameworks, even when framed as protection, can act as technologies of governance that silence local norms and marginalise children's own situated knowledge. Within such structures, both researchers and participants risk becoming objects of regulation rather than agents of ethical reflection. This study contributes to these debates by showing how Chinese researchers navigate ethical dilemmas not through fixed frameworks but through the negotiation of ethical awareness.

5.1. Beyond culturally sensitive frameworks

Findings from our focus groups indicate that Chinese researchers face ethical tensions not only because of the absence of national guidelines but also because of the normative and disciplinary power of global ethics discourse itself. In practice, many participants encountered an ethical double bind: meeting internationally recognised expectations of procedural ethics often meant violating the relational norms that underpin everyday moral life.

This ethical double bind was not a matter of personal unfamiliarity with research ethics but a structural condition produced by overlapping ethical frameworks. Researchers found themselves pulled between two forms of legitimacy: on the one hand, the procedural rationality of institutionalised ethics, often modelled on Global North traditions that prioritise documentation and standardised consent (Hammett et al., 2022); on the other, the relational ethics embedded in Chinese moral life, where authority, obligation and care are distributed through social hierarchies. Acting 'ethically' by one measure could easily constitute a transgression by the other.

Notably, although many countries in the Global North, such as the UK and Ireland, have seen a relational turn in research ethics, with increasing consideration of children's involvement in research (Lundy, 2007), this turn remains largely unfamiliar to Chinese scholars, whose understanding of research ethics is still shaped by the ideals of procedural ethics. As a result, in our participants' accounts, these tensions manifested as persistent feelings of guilt, hesitation and self-doubt. Ethics here no longer functions as a guide but emerges as a site of conflict. For example, when Luo insisted on individual consent forms to satisfy ethical expectations, school administrators perceived this as distrustful, undermining the collective authority of teachers and parents. Conversely, when Ning deferred to parents out of cultural respect, she later recognised that children's dissenting voices had been excluded. Both choices were defensible yet emotionally troubling. Such ethical dilemmas arise not from a lack of ethical guidance but from an awareness of mutually incompatible obligations.

This pattern echoes critiques that power operates less through direct coercion than through the internalisation of disciplinary norms (Liebel, 2023). Chinese researchers in our research internalised both the bureaucratic expectations of international ethics regimes and the relational obligations embedded in their social world, leaving little coherent space for confident action. The outcome reflects what Smith (2021) describes as epistemic self-colonisation: the pursuit of global legitimacy through standards that inadvertently undermine local forms of reasoning. Similar tensions have been observed in other emerging research communities and under-regulated contexts (Sagitova et al., 2024), where the global circulation of ethical ideals reinforces hierarchies of authority and expertise. These double binds are therefore not temporary shortcomings awaiting improved regulation but inherent to the coexistence of multiple ethical frameworks. Recognising this condition shifts the focus from diagnosing 'unethical' behaviour to understanding ethical awareness as the capacity to live with tension, to remain responsive within constraint rather than seeking permanent resolution.

5.2. From cultural adaptation to ethical awareness

These findings indicate that cultural sensitivity alone cannot resolve ethical ambiguity. As Liebel (2023) and Liebel and Markowska-Manista (2023) argue, research ethics should be grounded in situated knowledge that arises from the lived experiences and social positions of those involved. Universal ethical models detached from local realities risk reproducing epistemic hierarchies rather than challenging them. In this sense, ethical uncertainty can be seen as a moment of reflexive engagement, an entry point for what may be called dynamic ethics: an ongoing process of responsiveness and relational awareness rather than a matter of strict compliance.

Hence, we propose shifting attention from constructing new prescriptive frameworks, whether national or international, to examining how ethical awareness develops through everyday practice. This does not mean rejecting global standards such as the ERIC framework (2024) or the UNCRC, but reimagining them as dialogic points of reference. In contexts where formal infrastructures are limited, ethical capacity grows through attentiveness, affective attunement and collective reflection. Moments of hesitation or discomfort can thus become productive starting points for ethical reasoning.

Building on these insights, we develop a practice-based framework of ethical awareness to capture how researchers in China navigate moral complexity in the absence of formalised regulation. Rather than proposing a culturally specific frame, we conceptualise ethical awareness as a relational capacity, the ability to recognise and act within ethical tension. This orientation complements procedural ethics by foregrounding attentiveness, negotiation and situated judgement, and extends ERIC's (2024) 'three Rs': Rights, Relationships and Reflexivity, through the lived experiences of Chinese researchers. In the following section, we present this framework through three interrelated dimensions of ethical awareness.

1. *Awareness of Children's Welfare and Vulnerability*

The first dimension involves attentiveness to how research practices affect children's welfare and sense of safety. Participants often recognised moments when adult assumptions or institutional hierarchies rendered children vulnerable. Such awareness emerged not from training but from embodied encounters, when a child showed discomfort, resisted participation, or disclosed distressing experiences. As Qiao recalled, she 'knew something was wrong' when a teacher insisted on children's participation, yet struggled to refuse within the school's hierarchy. These moments illustrate what Guillemin and Gillam (2004: 262) term 'ethically important moments', when noticing precedes knowing. Recognition of potential harm often came before action, forming the first layer of ethical awareness: a readiness to register moral stakes in ordinary interactions. Being ethical, then, entails not only protection but an orientation of care and attentiveness to children's emotional realities.

2. *Awareness of the Power and Limits of Ethical Guidelines*

   The second dimension concerns recognising that ethical frameworks themselves are embedded in power and legitimacy. Participants described how institutional or international requirements, though designed to protect, often constrained local moral frameworks. As Mei noted, following ethical suggestions sometimes meant disregarding local children's spontaneous expressions of emotion. This awareness reframes ethics as a field of power relations rather than as neutral rules. It echoes Liebel and Budde's (2023) critique of the universalisation of Northern ethical standards. By seeing ethical rules as historically situated, researchers can question not only what counts as ethical, but who decides.

3. *Awareness of Autonomy, Reflection, and Adaptation*

   The third dimension highlights reflective autonomy, the capacity to interpret and adapt ethical principles in practice. Without strong institutional oversight, participants relied on peer discussion and emotional introspection to navigate dilemmas. After a moment that felt 'unethical', Mei later saw her hesitation as a form of learning. Similarly, Luo's reflection on 'procedural over-correction' showed how ethical understanding evolves through self-questioning. Notably, autonomy here does not mean independence from norms but the ability to mediate between conflicting ones through situated judgement. Ethics becomes an ongoing practice of moral cultivation, extending the ERIC framework's (2024) emphasis on reflexivity by situating ethical autonomy within relationships of doubt, dialogue and responsiveness.

Taken together, these three layers, attentiveness to children's welfare, critical awareness of ethical structures, and reflexive autonomy, constitute a practice-based framework of ethical awareness. Sensitivity to children's well-being exposes institutional constraints, while recognising those constraints encourages reflexive adaptation. Through this iterative process, ethical awareness develops over time as a lived engagement rather than as compliance with a predefined model. Although grounded in China's institutional and cultural context, this framework contributes to broader discussions on research ethics in global childhood studies. It suggests that ethical practice can be sustained even in the absence of formal infrastructures, and that reflective spaces such as the dialogic focus groups in this study can foster collective ethical awareness. In this sense, ethical awareness reframes ethics as a relational practice of responsiveness within constraint.

6. Ethical reflexivity as method

Although this study centres on researchers' responses to ethical awareness, the research process itself became a site of collective ethical engagement. The dialogic focus groups not only generated data but also enabled participants to revisit and articulate their ethical positions through shared reflection. For many, ethical discomfort had previously been internalised as confusion or inadequacy; hearing others voice similar unease created recognition and relief. Ning, for instance, found words for previously unspoken concerns after hearing peers' accounts. These exchanges opened space for relational thinking and ethical articulation, particularly in a context with little institutional support for ethical deliberation. This resonates with Pillow's (2003) view of reflexivity as a dialogic and relational process situated within social and affective contexts.

Collective reflexivity thus functioned as both method and outcome. Through storytelling, disagreement and mutual questioning, participants developed a shared language for interpreting ethical tension. Some re-examined earlier decisions: Ning reconsidered her practice, while Mei recognised that her withdrawal from children's conversations reflected care rather than neglect. Such shifts, though subtle, show that ethical understanding emerges through interaction rather than instruction. Consensus was not the goal; instead, participants engaged in what Riessman (2015) terms reflexive practice, revisiting dilemmas and encountering alternative ethical languages. In this shared space, hesitation and partiality were revalued as integral to ethical work.

This methodological insight extends beyond the study. It suggests that ethical capacity can be strengthened not only through regulation or training but by creating reflexive forums such as peer dialogues, workshops and post-fieldwork debriefings, where researchers reflect on the lived complexities of fieldwork. In settings like China, where formal ethics infrastructures are still evolving, such spaces can serve as intermediary forms of accountability without bureaucratisation. More broadly, dialogic reflexivity reframes qualitative research itself as an ethical practice: listening, questioning and co-constructing meaning become moral acts. Ethics need not precede research as a checklist; it can unfold within research as a situated, relational and emotionally negotiated process.

In sum, the focus groups show how ethical awareness can be collectively cultivated under structural constraint. Rather than prescribing standards, they enabled participants to experience ethics as something enacted between people, fragile, negotiated and continually reworked. Doing ethics without a 'map', then, is not disorientation but openness: learning from ambiguity and from others.

7. Towards a living list of reflective questions for researchers

This study does not aim to produce another ethical framework or a prescriptive set of guidelines. Instead, it highlights the value of cultivating ongoing reflection through shared inquiry. Ethical awareness, as discussed above, is an evolving capacity rather than a rule to be followed. One practical step towards supporting this orientation is to develop a living list of reflective questions that researchers can use to pause, think and engage with ethical tensions as they arise.

These questions are not meant to standardise behaviour but to stimulate ethical imagination. They might ask, for example: What forms of harm or discomfort might remain invisible in my research interactions? Whose comfort, safety or voice am I prioritising, and why? How do institutional or cultural norms shape my sense of what is 'ethical'? When I hesitate, what does this reveal about my assumptions of care or legitimacy? Such questions turn hesitation into reflection rather than self-blame, allowing researchers to stay with ethical complexity, to make uncertainty speakable and shareable.

Future work will expand this list through participatory collaboration with both researchers and children, inviting children to contribute their own questions about how research is done with them rather than on them. In doing so, we aim to co-create a reflexive platform where ethical reflection evolves dialogically across generations and positionalities. This platform will not yield fixed answers but provide a shared space where ethical awareness is collectively nurtured, tested and renewed. It aligns with recent calls for participatory and relational ethics (Liebel & Markowska-Manista, 2023; Lundy, 2007), emphasising dialogue, humility and responsiveness over certainty. Ultimately, the living list offers a modest yet tangible way to extend the practice-based ethics advocated in this paper, open, situated and responsive to change.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Kaidong Guo: Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Yan Zhu:** Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Jie Gao:** Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Yuwei Xu:** Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Yuchen Wang:** Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition. **Xiao Qu:** Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition.

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