Displaying intimate friendships: Chinese children's practices of friendships at school

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Abstract:

Through an intensive ethnographic fieldwork, this project explores rural Chinese children's understandings and experiences of peer friendships at school. When talking about "friend" and "friendship", children tended to brag that they were friends with many peers, but at the same time to particularly highlight a very small number of peers as the most intimate friends, such as "best friends". Inspired by Finch's concept of "display", this article explores how these Chinese children used different approaches to highlight intimate friends' particularity in intimate friendship displays at school. This article, firstly, unpacks three commonly used approaches in these children's displays of intimate friendships: 1) building up an exclusionary "intimate friends only" policy, 2) imparting to certain objects, actions and language sentimental and specific meanings as "tokens" of their friendship, and 3) giving priority to intimate friends. Secondly, it discusses the importance of audiences and cooperation between actors in intimate friendship displays.

Key words:

Friendship, Children, Intimacy, Display, Chinese school

Word count:

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Introduction

In today's China, recently, there has been an increasing number of negative reports about Chinese children's social and emotional capacities, especially those who are deprived of family support (e.g., having migrant parent(s) and/or being residential students from a young age) (UNICEF 2019). To provide these children with social support, the Chinese government has released a series of policies and practices with which to address this issue. For example, since 2011, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China and UNICEF have jointly released the Social and Emotional Learning Project (SEL Project) in rural schools in China, with a focus on understanding and support in relationships with others, such as peers, teachers and parents (UNICEF 2019). To ensure the outcome of this project in the Chinese context, it is important to collect abundant empirical data with which to develop in-depth understanding of rural Chinese children's social and emotional experiences in school, such as their relationships with peers and teachers, and so to ensure that the project can respond well to their particular needs (Lin and Yao 2014). Therefore, this article aims to contribute to this task by adding knowledge of how rural Chinese children understand and do friendships with school peers.

This article first reviews its conceptual framework. Since there is not too much Chinese literature on this topic, Western based sociological perspectives in friendship studies and childhood studies have offered the main theoretical support. Two key ideas were used to set up this research. Firstly, friendship is considered as being diverse, complex and contextualised; patterns, definitions, practices, and experiences of friendships happening in people's everyday personal lives are different and need to be placed in certain contexts to be understood (Adams and Allen 2007). Secondly, children are considered as being social actors; it is important to understand their views on and experiences of interpersonal relationships, such as friendships, in their everyday lives (James and Prout 2003). Inside a framework inspired by literature and findings, specific concepts, such as intimacy (Jamieson 2005) and display (Finch 2007), have been included to support the interpretation of the article's findings.

Literature Review: A Sociological understanding of display in children's friendships

Friendship is an important form of relationship that individuals have with others. When studying people's understandings and experiences of friendship, sociologists place considerable emphasis on the *processes* through which surrounding contexts shape different groups' constructions of friendship cultures and patterns (Allan and Adams 2007). Adams and Allan (1998:4) define *"context"* in friendship studies as "elements which surround friendships". They also divide *"context"* into different *levels*, including "personal environment level" (e.g. gender, race, and socioeconomic status), the "network level" (e.g. kinship, family and other network patterns), the "community or subcultural level" (e.g. workplace and other communities/subcultures within which individuals are involved and sociability and friendships are embedded), and the "societal level" (e.g. modernism, industrialism and other particular economic and social structures) (Adams and Allan 1998:6-12). Thus, sociologists tend to argue that, depending on the contexts, people understand the meanings of friendships and practice friendships differently (Allan and Adams 2007). This sociological insistence significantly contributes to the exploration of the complexity and diversity of "friendship" in different contexts (Bagwell and Schmidt 2011).

Compared with numerous studies that focus on exploring people's contextualised understandings of friendship and friend, how people *do* friendships in the process of interacting with friends and surrounding others in different contexts increasingly attracts scholars' attention. When exploring how people *do* friendship and investigating the sociocultural "principles" that shape people's particular strategies of practising friendships, display literature in family studies significantly inspires this project. To respond to the changing structure and fluidity of family identities in contemporary families, Finch (2007) develops the concept of "display". She grounds her concept of display in David Morgan's analysis of the importance of doing family things when people form the idea of their family. Finch (2007:66) develops her central argument that "families need to be 'displayed' as well as 'done'". The concept of "display" is defined as:

> … the process by which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain of their actions constitute "doing family things" and thereby confirm that these relationships are "family" relationships. (Finch 2007:73)

In recent years, Finch's concept of "display" has been well developed in family studies. Given its contribution to the understandings of family relationships, some scholars have questioned whether the term could usefully be extended to other kinds of personal relationships, such as friendship (Dermott and Seymour 2011; Letchfield and Hafford-Letchfield 2018). One reason could be that the concept of "display" can further contribute to the "individual-social lens" used by sociologists to understand children's friendships: placing friendships in context to build up a connection between friendship – a type of interpersonal relationship between individuals – and surrounding social and cultural contexts. Although some studies have used this term to explore display in friendship, most of the studies focus on adults rather than children. This is a gap in the existing literature, to which this article aims to contribute through a China-based case study.

When placing friendship studies in their contexts, childhood is one significant context. Aligning with the development of the "new" sociology of childhood at the end of the 20th century, an increasing number of scholars recognised the importance of "dehomogenizing and demarginalizing" children (Deegan 2005:10) in studies of childhoods and children. This "new" paradigm of the sociology of childhood appreciates that children are active social actors and have agency "in the construction and determination of their own social lives" and that "childhood's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right" (James and Prout 2003:8). It highlights that children living in different societies can experience different childhoods. Thus, children's peer friendships in childhood increasingly attract scholars' attention as a meaningful topic, which contributes significantly to the emergence of "new" sociological studies of children and childhoods.

When studying children's friendships, many sociologists believe that, apart from age, sociocultural contexts also play a large part in shaping children's understandings of friendships and experiences around friendships (Davies 2015). As claimed by James (2013), children are reflexive human beings, who are capable of understanding and reflecting upon events in their personal lives, such as various and changing relationships with others. Thus, an exploration of friendship displays occurring between rural Chinese children in their childhoods can further contribute to the understanding of children's capacities for negotiating with surrounding contexts to understand, evaluate and manage relationships with others. In

this case, through drawing on the above Western-based theories and concepts to explore rural Chinese children's sophisticated ways of negotiating with surrounding environments to display intimate friendships in a school setting, this article can not only contribute to the literature on friendship displays in childhood, but can also offer rich empirical data to support the development of the SEL project in China.

Methods

As claimed previously, the "new" paradigm of the sociology of childhood has an impact on children's friendship studies. This paradigm also offers a methodological implication. It recommends the power of ethnography in childhood studies, in that ethnographic approaches treat children as the primary sources of knowledge and place them at the centre of research (James and Prout 2003). Therefore, with the aim of providing a deep, thick and vivid description of children's relationships with others at school from their own perspective, I decided to conduct an ethnographic study. When choosing a research setting, the boarding school setting stood out. The rural boarding school setting was chosen not only because rural residential children's capacities for understanding and managing relationships with others were questioned in China's society but also because school is an important context when exploring children's friendships. As a place populated by schoolchildren and adult staff, schools can bring together such diversities as age, generation, gender, ethnicity, religion, and culture, as well as socioeconomic differences (Vincent et al. 2018). It is here that "the dynamics and contradictions of friendship" are understood and experienced by children in ways that are more "uncertain and intense" than in other contexts (Vincent et al. 2018:60). Schools in China are highly politicised institutions and are managed strictly (Guo 2004). Since this project was partly funded by the Chinese Scholarship Council, support from both a personal network and the local educational authority won me access to a rural primary boarding school (given the pseudonym "Central Primary School") in Hubei Province, China in 2016, to conduct an intensive 5-month ethnographic fieldwork. Central Primary School serves over 300 pupils (Year 1 to 6) from surrounding villages. In the field, after considering different class teachers' attitudes towards this research, I engaged with 49 child participants (25 boys and 24 girls) from Primary Year 5 to observe how these children talk and *do* friendships with school peers. In my fieldwork time, 42 children were aged 11, 5 were aged 12, and 2 were

aged 13. Most of these children's parent(s) moved to cities as migrant workers. The remaining parent(s) mainly worked as farmers or factory workers.

In the field, I used various data collection methods. Participant observation and ethnographic conversations were the main methods, supplemented with formal interviews (35 children having 30- to 40-minute individual/paired semi-structured interviews), and a participatory method I developed called the "diary programme" (in which 36 children participated). In participant observations, I was a participant-as-observer, which role allowed both the "external" view of an observer and the "internal" view of a participant (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:109-110). Ethnographic conversations between children and me were always "child-led", which means that the topics of conversations were chosen by children themselves. These ethnographic conversations allowed me abundant opportunities to engage with children's cultures of communication, while providing them with a free space in which to discuss the issues that most concerned and interested them (Christensen 2004). Interviews were included to ensure that I could have opportunities to intensively and privately discuss topics of "friends" and "friendships" with children, and to add data on children's practices of friendships that took place at times and in spaces that I did not have access to (e.g., events in the past or episodes occurring in dormitory rooms in the evening). As highlighted by some scholars, children, as relatively powerless social actors in a world dominated by adult discourse and surveillance, often feel stressed in face-to-face work with adults, such as interviews (Wyness 2012). The "diary programme" was then involved as an alternative approach that children could use to build up private communications with me in ways that they felt safe and comfortable with. In the "diary programme", children were offered new diary books and were encouraged to record their thoughts and experiences of friendships as well as questions about me or about this project that they wanted to share with me privately. They were invited to hand their notebooks to me whenever they wished, whereupon I read them and replied by writing back in their notebooks.

After data collection, thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was used to analyse collected data. Through conducting close reading, coding and "in-process analytic writing" (Emerson et al. 2011:79), some ideas, themes, categories and topics, such as display, emerged from the data. Since the fieldwork was conducted by using the local dialect (*hubei fangyan*), translation

from dialect to Mandarin and then to English[1] was a challenging task in data management, analysis, and writing. In this translation process, both child participants and their English teacher were consulted to ensure that the translation respected participants' original meanings (Koulouriotis, 2011). These local people's support was particularly helpful in the process of interpreting and translating local dialect terms into Mandarin (Chinese).

In qualitative research, reflexivity is valued to ensure rigour. In this project, reflexivity not only contributed to awareness of the influence of my own meanings on the research process (see below) and results (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995), but also offered insights into some potential observation targets. Participant observation has significant contributions to make when exploring friendship display in children's practices of friendships. After reviewing other scholars' way of using interviews to explore relationship display (Brownlie 2014; Letchfield and Hafford-Letchfield 2018), I wanted to study such display in a more "natural" context. The reason is that interview cannot offer enough space to involve the significant "audience" in display, and this is, in fact, an important part of Finch's (2007) concept of "display". This does not mean that the interview method ignores the importance of audience, because the interviewer actually also plays the role of audience (Brownlie 2014). However, the interviewer, as an outsider in relation to the personal communities examined (Pahl and Spencer 2010), functions more as an "external other" (Dermott and Seymour 2011:14). Therefore, the interviewer cannot entirely represent the group who are the audience, and who function as the "internal" others (e.g., acquaintances, such as classmates in this project) in display.

Apart from being inspired by literature, the experience of reflecting on my multiple relationships with different groups of people in the field also disclosed the importance of exploring the role of audience as "observer" in relationships. Since I entered the field with support from the local authority, I frequently have visitors from that authority. As disclosed by teachers after we established rapport at the beginning of my fieldwork, they shared a suspicion that I was an expert on primary education, hired by the higher educational authority in the name of "research" to covertly investigate and evaluate Central Primary School's

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[1] To encourage research impact in the UK and China, the local dialect was translated to both Mandarin and English.

educational performance; or – after observing frequent interactions between local officials and me – that I was a girl from a powerful family with a strong political network within local government. I then recognised that relationships are "not simply a dyadic structure, but a triadic one, which includes the observer" (Herrmann-Pillath 2010:337). Therefore, interactions with one group of people were observed by others. As a result, relationships with one group can shape relationships with others. Consequently, in the fieldwork, I paid attention to balancing my relationships with different groups of people, such as teachers, children, and parents. However, bias still existed. For example, in this work, I have to admit that my gender role as a young Chinese woman, playing a role as an "older sister" (*jiejie*), made my relationship with girls closer than that with boys. Therefore, in both my field notes and writing products, girls are more prominent than boys. However, this does not mean that friendship display occurring between boys was ignored. As suggested by examples in the following discussions, episodes of friendship display happened in both boys' and girls' friendships and were all included in the analysis. Also, it is important to clarify that this article aims to indicate some "general" rules shared by both boys and girls in terms of displaying intimate friends' particularity, rather than to compare gendered patterns of displaying friendships.

In the field, ethical principles, including informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and knowledge exchange, were followed carefully. In this research, after joining research induction sessions, reading the information leaflet, and attending follow-up Q&A sessions, informed consent was given by schoolteachers, participating children and their guardians. Sevensson (2006) notes that relationships between fieldworkers and locals, and between different groups of local people, can cause ethical dilemmas. In conversations with children, I noticed a certain fact, namely that, when I was absent, teachers encouraged children to participate in my research in order to make a good impression on me; they called me a "*laoshi*" (teacher) to show their respect. I suspected that this action was a result of teachers' suspicions about my identity, as discussed previously. Thus, although I highlighted my role as a "learner" (Corsaro 2003), who wanted to learn more about the children's world from them, and as an "unusual adult" (Christensen 2004), who wanted to develop a more equal power relationship with the children, in the presence of children it seemed likely that they were unable to distinguish me from powerful teachers. In this case, I was concerned about the risk

that teachers' intervention might manipulate some children's decisions when giving consent. To respond to this ethical risk, I treated informed consent as an ongoing process throughout the project, rather than a one-off paperwork task at the beginning of the fieldwork. For example, during the period of ethnographic fieldwork, if there was any doubt as to whether some children still wanted to be involved in the research (e.g., when children did not want to talk to the researcher for a certain number of days), consent was re-checked with these children.

Also, to show my approach of working *with* children, hearing children and appreciating children's ideas, in the field I frequently consulted children in order to make data collection activities more child-friendly. For example, because friendship is an emotionally charged relationship (Greco et al. 2015), exploring experiences of it could cause emotional reactions in children, such as negative feelings when sharing a friend's betrayal. Since many of them did not want to disclose negative emotions in public with witnesses in the crowded school setting, I consulted children and worked with them to develop plans for how to use school space (e.g. interview room), tools (e.g. cushions and chocolate), and body language (e.g. patting on the back) to comfort upset children. Through an ongoing process of building, maintaining and adjusting relationships with research participants in ethnographic fieldwork (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995), over time, children increasingly accepted me as a friendly and trustworthy *jiejie* (older sister). Such rapport increasingly helped me to gain access to these children's world and to learn more about their everyday friendship experiences with peers, such as friendship display, as discussed in the following sections.

Displaying the intimate friendship: Highlighting intimate friends' particularity

Within a school setting, since "boundaries between friend and non-friend are often blurred", more overt friendship displays are needed in order to assert to an audience that "this is my friend" (Dermott and Seymour 2011:18). In Central Primary School, similarly, these P5 Chinese children also used different strategies to display their intimate friendships. Through combining observed "displays" of close friendships with peers during break time (Davies 2015:49) with children's narratives, it seems that highlighting intimate friends' *particularity* formed the children's approach to displaying their intimate friendships.

In relationship studies, intimacy is often presumed to be "a very particular form of 'closeness' and being 'special' to another person" (Jamieson 2005:189). In conversations about intimacy between intimate friends, most of the boys and girls expressed similar expectations of "particularity", "reciprocity", and strong emotional closeness attached to such intimate relations with "special" friends. They believed that "special friends need to be treated differently from the others" (Taozi, a P5 girl, Field note, 17th May 2016). Boundaries between themselves, their intimate friends, and other peers outside their intimate friendships were commonly compared by these children, as a standard against which to evaluate particularity (Letchfield and Hafford-Letchfield 2018): that is, whether they were treated differently, as the "special" ones of their intimate friends. Jamieson (2005:189) argues that:

> …intimacy suggest[s] an absence or lowering of boundaries among intimates in comparison to the presence or heightening of boundaries between intimates and those outside of their intimate relationships.

Indeed, in both children's narratives and practices, most children demonstrated an expectation of a clear boundary, or even an exclusionary boundary, between themselves and non-intimates. In contrast, when discussing the boundaries between themselves and their intimate friends, the children expressed expectations that there would be no or low boundaries. When children were dissatisfied with the boundaries set up by friends between themselves and other peers, conflicts arose. For example, access to confidential information was set as the "standard" for evaluating the levels of boundaries. Just such a conflict occurred in an intimate friendship group consisting of three P5 boys, who mutually nominated each other as best friends. The cause of the conflict was that Hongyang did not openly tell his friends (Xiaoming and Dong) about his romantic secret (he liked Taozi, a P5 girl). Moreover, Hongyang had lied, denying that it was true, when Xiaoming and Dong asked him about the news they had heard from some girls, namely that Hongyang had told Taozi he liked her. Xiaoming and Dong were both angry and disappointed. Xiaoming explained their anger as due to the feeling that:

> Hongyang does not trust us; he does not view us as brothers. We always tell him our secrets, but he did not share his secret with us; he may not trust us. It is unfair. When I liked Fanfan (a P5 girl), at the very beginning, I told Dong and Hongyang because they are my brothers and I trust them. We could accept it if Hongyang did not tell us because he was shy. However, we could

not accept a lie. He likes Taozi, but he said he did not like her when we asked him. We knew his true heart from other people, from the girls. They told us Hongyang told Taozi he likes her. We are very angry. Even girls knew earlier than us. (Field note, 23rd March 2016)

As claimed by children, sharing secrets with intimate friends was commonly highlighted as a key element of the intimate friendship. Therefore, many children allowed their intimate friends to join in their one-to-one chats or interviews with me. When I questioned the appropriateness of their friends' presence, by expressing concern over the confidentiality of our conversations, most of them refused to ask their friends to leave and proudly confirmed their friends' free access to their private lives (e.g., "there is no secret between us" and "he/she knows everything about me" as the children expressed it). Although this can be interpreted as children's "display" of intimacy with friends, it also suggests that "no secret" was valued as proof of "no boundary" between intimates.

However, this does not mean that children never allowed friends to maintain privacy. In fact, children commonly asserted that they respected their intimate friends' privacy and would never push them to share information if they did not want to. Yet, as in the above example, children found it intolerable if their intimate friends maintained privacy in front of them but gave other peers open access to private information. This suggests that the way intimate friends managed the level of boundaries (absence or presence, low or high) between themselves and other peers fundamentally affected their confidence as to whether they were "special" to their valued friends. In the above example, Hongyang's behaviour failed to prove that the boundary he set between himself and intimates (Xiaoming and Dong) was lower than that between himself and non-intimates (the girls). As a result, Xiaoming and Dong doubted their special status as intimate "brothers" of Hongyang.

When the children embodied their expectations of "particularity" in intimate friendships, different approaches were applied. In observations, it was frequently noticed that children used certain means to create an "intimate friends only" zone that excluded other peers. In some cases, such an "intimate friends only" zone was built up with a "spatial boundary". For example, to avoid being overheard or witnessed by other peers, when some children needed to talk or do important stuff with their intimate friends, they asked me or other close friends to stand guard around them to stop other peers from coming close. However, in most cases,

the exclusionary boundary was established by creating an unwelcoming atmosphere when other peers tried to overstep the boundary of the "intimate friends only" zone. The observed episodes surrounding Juan's "secret birthday party" contribute to just such a picture of how children used different means (e.g., words, tones, body language and facial expressions) of creating an exclusionary boundary to keep non-intimate peers outside.

> When I entered the classroom, many girls chatted in groups. When Shuyue saw me, she stopped chatting with Bing, Baolin, and Yingyue and came to me to ask if I wanted to join Juan's secret birthday party in Juan's home. She said that only she and Bing were invited. She sounded excited and suddenly said: "Oh! I've just remembered one important thing about the party; I need to tell Bing." Then she stood next to me and called Bing loudly to ask her to come over. Bing was chatting with Baolin and Yingyue in another corner of the classroom when she heard Shuyue. These girls stopped chatting and looked at her. Bing asked: "What's up? We are telling stories." Shuyue had a secretive smile and said: "It is very important, you know!" Then glanced at Juan's seat. Shuyue's secretive facial expression and tone caught Baolin's and Yingyue's attention and made them curious. Baolin and Yingyue asked quickly: "What?" Shuyue looked more excited and tried to hold her laughter. She shook her head as a response: "Do not ask, I will not say!" Then, she suddenly ran to Bing and whispered with two hands covering her mouth. After a few seconds, Shuyue finished talking with Bing and ran over to me. Baolin and Yingyue seemed even more curious to know what had happened because in an urgent tone they kept asking Bing what had happened. Shuyue suddenly stopped and turned around to Bing; she laughed and said loudly: "Do not tell others, it is a secret!" Bing also gave a secretive smile as a response. At this time, Juan came into the classroom and asked Bing what had happened; in the same way as previously, Bing whispered to Juan and then they laughed together. (Field note, 8th April 2016)

In this scenario, when Shuyue used secretive language and behaviour, such as giving a secretive smile, shaking her head as a response, and whispering with two hands covering her mouth, to discuss Juan's birthday plan with Bing in front of Baolin and Yingyue, she thus created an exclusionary boundary to show that Baolin and Yingyue were not entitled to share in this confidential information. This exclusionary boundary sent Baolin and Yingyue a message that only Shuyue and Bing, as intimates, had access to this secret.

The "intimate friends only" zone not only means being eligible to gain access to confidential information; in other cases, it was closely linked to another frequently used means of friendship display: imparting sentimental and specific meanings to certain objects, actions

and language as a "token" of the intimate friendship. For example, Wenhua, a P5 girl, described the action of "walking arm in arm" as a specific commitment between herself and her ex-best friend, Qinyang:

> I broke up with Qinyang because I saw Qinyang walking arm in arm with Yulian on the way to the dormitory. I was extremely angry. She broke our promise. We said only us can walk arm in arm. […] Once we have agreed that this stuff is only for each other, I would expect and trust she would keep her word for our friendship; so, when she broke the promise, I felt betrayed. (Interview, 11th May 2016)

As in Letchfield and Hafford-Letchfield's (2018) findings on "personalised codes", unique actions (e.g., holding hands, walking arm in arm) and language (e.g., words and gestures with special meanings, and nicknames) were frequently used by most P5 children as symbols of intimate friendship. Therefore, in the above example, for Wenhua, "walking arm in arm" was a meaningful "personalised code" and a "privilege" only available to herself and Qinyang as intimates. Qinyang's act of walking arm in arm with Yulian was thus viewed as a betrayal of Wenhua because she failed to maintain Wenhua's particularity as an intimate friend. Letchfield and Hafford-Letchfield (2018) hold that highlighting the particularity of friendship can provide a feeling of comfort in friendship by giving people the confidence that their friendship is as intimate as they expect. Therefore, a failure to preserve the particularity of an intimate friendship can challenge the friendship through undermining the pact of loyalty. As a result, Qinyang's act of walking arm in arm with Yulian was a stimulus that ended the intimate friendship between herself and Wenhua.

Apart from these specific actions and words, meaningful objects, especially gifts given by friends, were mentioned even more frequently as "tokens" of the friendship. In both observations and children's narratives, exchanging gifts with intimate friends was typically included in their everyday interactions. Among these exchanged gifts, as recorded in the example below, birthday gifts were always specifically referred to when both boys and girls presented their closeness to intimate friends.

> Although it was supposed to be a secret party, it seemed that almost all the children have heard about Juan's birthday party now. The reason is that Shuyue brought a photograph taken at the birthday party at Juan's home to school to show to the other children. I also saw this photograph. In the

photograph, Juan, Shuyue, Bing and Juan's sister were sitting on a three-seat sofa with a birthday cake held up by Juan in the middle. Juan and Shuyue were wearing the same baseball caps. When Shuyue showed this photograph to me, Juan came with her. Juan pointed at the picture and said the cap was a birthday gift from Shuyue. Shuyue added: "It is evidence of our friendship." Juan then laughed and put her arms around Shuyue's shoulders. (Field note, 10th April 2016)

As other scholars note (e.g., Finch 2007), on some specific occasions, such as birthdays, an intimate personal relationship needs to be, or is expected to be, displayed. At these specific moments, gift-giving is a meaningful way of displaying relationships by enabling people to convey the meaning of their relationship through thoughtfully chosen gifts that show they care (Finch 2007). In this field note, for Shuyue and Juan, the birthday gift (matching baseball caps) functioned as evidence of a good friendship.

The above example also refers to another frequently mentioned type of physical object, apart from gifts, that matters in friendship display: photographs of friends together. Photographs are an important visual symbol with which to display relationships (Finch 2007; Letchfield and Hafford-Letchfield 2018). Photographs offer a symbolic and embodied knowledge of the people who are considered the important ones (Davies 2015:91). Similarly, in the above example, the photograph of Shuyue and Juan wearing the same baseball cap at Juan's birthday party with another friend and Juan's family conveyed two key pieces of information. Firstly, the birthday cake shows that it was a memorable and specific moment in Juan's life. Bing and Shuyue, being introduced to Juan's family and involved in Juan's special moment, could thus be clearly seen as significant friends of Juan. Secondly, although Bing was also invited to Juan's birthday party, she was not wearing the same baseball cap as Juan and Shuyue. Therefore, wearing the same baseball caps could further emphasize the particularity of Juan and Shuyue's intimate friendship. Apart from the most frequently mentioned gifts and photographs, other types of physical "tokens" of their intimate friendships (e.g., co-created handcrafts and signed "pledges of friendship") were mentioned by a small group of children. For example, many P5 boys gave their intimate friends "brother-only" red envelopes (*hongbao*), a type of monetary gift, on special occasions, such as birthdays and Chinese New Year, as a proof of the 'brotherhood' between their intimate friends and themselves. (Field note, 28th April 2016). Undoubtedly, all these meaningful objects, as display tools, significantly represented these P5 children's intimate friendships.

Apart from the methods of display discussed above, giving priority to intimate friends was another strategy very frequently employed by these P5 children to highlight their intimate friends' particularity. When studying the importance of friendship, few studies discuss "priority" within friendship groups. Although some studies have noticed the presence of hierarchy in these groups (George and Browne 2000), the discussions are more about the power difference experienced by children with different positions in friendship. While this research also confirms the existence of power difference in friendship groups, I would like to add that priority in friendship groups is not only about power but also about intimacy, as it could contribute to a feeling of particularity.

Subsequent to Juan's party preparations, described above (Field note, 8th April 2016), there was a conversation between Shuyue and me about the process of preparing and organising Juan's secret party. In this narrative-based display, Shuyue repeatedly and proudly emphasized that she was *the first one* to be informed by Juan about the secret birthday party plan. This action suggested that Shuyue put great value on the sequence in which intimate friends became involved in confidential matters. But why was this sequence so highly valued by Shuyue? In fact, although Juan, Shuyue and Bing mutually nominated each other as intimate friends, according to Shuyue, Bing had joined their intimate friendship group later. Nevertheless, it seemed that Juan was spending more and more time with Bing. Thus, in many conversations with me, Shuyue disclosed her anxiety about Bing's threat to her intimate friendship with Juan. Shuyue's anxiety might have led her to expect that she needed to prove that she was closer and more special to Juan than Bing, and that the levels of intimacy between herself and Juan were higher than those between Juan and Bing. Therefore, when Juan shared her idea for a secret birthday party with Shuyue first, this made Shuyue very pleased, because being *the first one* to share Juan's secret acknowledged her priority in Juan's friendship group and her position as Juan's most special and intimate friend. This conclusion was supported in other conversations with Shuyue about other situations. For example, Shuyue frequently mentioned that Juan tended to share more private things with her than with Bing and that she was always Juan's first audience.

This positive correlation made by Shuyue between "priority" and intimacy in friendship was shared by many other children. For example, in cases of friend nomination, especially in

friendship groups with more than two members, the sequence in which friends were listed was carefully considered. Since Taozi, a P5 girl, for instance, would have to transfer schools after finishing P5 in Central Primary School, she bought a class memory book (*tongxuelu*) and invited all her classmates to write one page for her. This memory book was predesigned with the same questions on each page to record the respondent's personal information. Among these predesigned questions, one was "Who are your friends?" When I viewed the children's answers, I noticed that some children used the equals sign (e.g. Duan wrote: "friends = Wenjun = Taozi") to emphasize the fact that they gave each friend the same weight (Field note, 30th May 2016). Otherwise, the "common sense" principle that "the most special ones should always be nominated before other friends" might annoy the friends who were not nominated first.

Important audiences and cooperation between actors in intimate friendship displays

Although friendship display is particularly needed and expected in certain situations, for instance at times of emotional or material hardship (Dermott and Seymour 2011), it is also conducted as an everyday practice. In this project, children's everyday friendship displays were frequently observed by other peers and by the researcher as important "audiences". Finch (2011:202-203) argues that "families need to be 'displayed as well as done'", the focus being on a process in which "individuals are conveying social meaning *to each other* as well as *to relevant others"*. Here, Finch (2011:203) highlights that the process of displaying is both directly experienced by participants within a family network, and "experienced, observed and understood by others" outside that network. Thus, many scholars have acknowledged the important role played by the audience in display work, and argued that a positive reaction from audiences is crucial for display work to be evaluated as successful (Finch 2007, 2011).

For these P5 children, whether surrounding peers, who were significant "internal" audiences within children's school network, were convinced by an observed friendship display can be used to evaluate the result of friendship displays. For example, after observing Shuyue's above-described act of showing off to her classmates the birthday photograph of herself and Juan wearing matching baseball caps, Wei, a P5 boy in Shuyue's class, commented: *"So sappy!"* When I asked why he made this comment, he said:

> Shuyue and Juan are close, you know, so they want to have everything the same, like pens, clothes, and notebooks. It is friendship, your research topic. (Field note, 10th April 2016)

Although Wei continued to refer to this display as evidence supporting an implicitly gendered criticism of the girls being overly sentimental in their display of friendship, the undoubtable ground of this criticism was that these two girls' display successfully convinced Wei of their close friendship, as directly pointed out by Wei himself. In fact, in the process of displaying relationships, audiences might operate not only as simple observers but also as direct participants in the creation of display (Dermott and Seymour 2011). When the message "we are intimate friends" has been successfully sent to and accepted by the audience, the audience might in turn contribute opportunities for future displays of friendship. For example, in the field, when children noticed a distressed peer, they always quickly turned for help to (a) certain other peer(s), who was (were) believed to be the sad child's intimate friend(s). This action can then create more opportunities for these children to enhance their intimacy.

However, audiences, especially the "internal" ones who know well the display actors' everyday social lives, cannot always be easily convinced. In some cases, when the surrounding peers were not convinced by some displays, they would question or even tease the display actors about the genuineness of the displayed intimate friendship, as in the following example:

> On our way to the dormitory rooms, Jing suddenly stopped me and said: "Could you please wait for a while? I need to do a very important thing". I asked: "What kind of thing?" Jing said: "I need to go back to find Bing to ask her to come with me; she is my soulmate." Baolin looked surprised and quickly asked: "What? When did Bing become your soulmate?" Jing said: "We have always been soulmates." Yingyue asked: "Why didn't I know?" Jing did not answer and then ran back to the classroom. After a while, Bing and Jing ran to us. When she saw Bing, Yingyue joked: "OK, your soulmate is here; shall we go now?" Bing looked confused and said: "What soulmate?" Baolin laughed and said: "Jing said you are her soulmate." Bing looked surprised and quickly turned to Jing: "Hmm? No! You are joking, right?" All the girls looked at Bing. Yingyue and Baolin tried to hold their laughter and Jing looked embarrassed. (Field note, 13th March 2016)

In this scenario, through using the word "soulmate" to describe her friendship with Bing, Jing tried to display her intimate friendship with Bing in front of me. At that moment, compared

to Baolin and Yingyue, I, as an "external" audience, who was relatively new to these P5 children's school networks, was less sensitive in picking up the suspicious aspect of the display. Baolin's and Yingyue's reactions of doubt to Jing's nomination of Bing as her soulmate can suggest one possibility: namely, that after the long time they had spent together in school, Baolin and Yingyue, as "internal" audiences, felt confused because they had not seen any clues in their daily interactions to make them believe that Bing was in fact Jing's soulmate.

Jing's display failed not only to convince the important "internal" audiences but also to gain positive cooperation from Bing, who was supposed to be her display partner. As an "external" audience, although Baolin's and Yingyue's reaction made me start to doubt the truthfulness of Jing's display, I still have certain reservations. One reason was that Baolin's and Yingyue's reaction might also be read as an act of vying with each other within friendship groups (George and Brown 2000). However, Bing's negative response to Jing's nomination of her as soulmate was the strongest evidence in support of Baolin and Yingyue's doubts, and confirmed my own scepticism about Jing's display.

Comparison of the above scenarios of display (Shuyue and Juan vs. Jing and Bing) suggests that positive cooperation between the display actors is crucial if display is to be convincing and successful. In some cases, display is not a "monodrama" but needs interaction and cooperation between the involved "actors". In the above case of Shuyue and Juan, their positive cooperation made their displays convincing. For example, in the scenario presented on 10th April 2016, when Shuyue mentioned the baseball cap as evidence of their friendship, Juan's reaction of laughing and putting her arms around Shuyue's shoulders could be viewed as positive cooperation. By contrast, in the conversation between Bing and Jing, rather than give a positive response, Bing used an uncompromising answer ("No! You are joking, right?") to reject Jing's identification of her as a soulmate. Therefore, besides the lack of a positive reaction from the audience, the lack of positive cooperation between display actors as well resulted in a display of intimate friendship being unconvincing.

Conclusion

To further understand what children did to confirm and show off the "particularity" of special friends in front of others in everyday school interactions, this article draws up the idea of

"display" from Finch (2007). It discusses the three approaches applied most frequently by these P5 children to embody such "particularity": 1) highlighting that the boundary of access to privacy between intimates is non-existent or at least lower than the boundary between intimates and outsiders; 2) creating a range of "intimate friends only" actions, words and objects as "tokens" and "symbols" of intimate friendship; and 3) giving intimate friends priority in their school lives. As the intimate relationship that children engaged in represented long periods of time and strong affection, they always expected reciprocity from their intimate friends. Therefore, in both narratives and observations, reciprocity was valued as a ground rule for maintaining an intimate friendship. For example, in everyday friendship display, once reciprocity was missing, as in secrets exchange and boundary management, intimate friendships would be threatened.

In the case of display, which is a friendship "show" performed by intimates as "actors" with others as the "audience", positive cooperation between display "actors" and positive feedback from convinced "audiences" are crucial elements of success. Otherwise, the truth of the displayed intimate friendship might be doubted. In successful displays of intimate friendship, the feeling of intimacy between friends and the act of displaying such intimacy can show a circular relationship. Specifically, the feeling of intimacy encourages intimates to employ approaches that highlight their intimate friends' "particularity" in display work. In return, successful displays further increase intimates' confidence in their friendship and simultaneously contribute to the development of intimacy in the friendship.

In addition, although this article does not focus on gender, it contributes to an understanding of gender in children's friendship studies. Gender has been a really popular concept in friendship studies. Some scholars believe that, due to the stereotypes of masculinity in boys' culture, boys tend to find it difficult to form such intimate friendships; however, this idea is questioned by some other scholars (Ryle 2015). Ryle (2015) argues that, in the mainstream research on gender and friendship, there is a risk of overemphasizing the gender differences in friendships and overlooking the intimate friendships that boys do actually form. This article supports Ryle's by showing examples of both girls and boys sharing similar expectations of intimate friendships and displaying intimate friendships.

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The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.