# (Re)Constructing Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion in Chinese Childhoods: Intersectional Perspectives and Transdisciplinary Approaches

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## Introduction

Although the universalisation of the UNCRC since 1989 tends to be perceived as a landmark for international consensus on realising children's rights to dignity, development, and participation, evidence suggests that inequality, exclusion, and social injustice in childhoods continue to prevail across the globe (Clark et al., 2020; Lareau, 2011). Groups of children's lives, opportunities, and access to provision and services are deprived by a range of barriers relating to diversity issues such as gender, disability, migration, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Konstantoni and Emejulu, 2017). In recent years, the UN Sustainable Development Goals have been influential in highlighting the crucial interdependence of equity and sustainability (Minujin and Ferrer, 2016), reiterating the necessity to seek effective, collective, and transformative solutions to unfairness, crisis, and divide in human societies. Nevertheless, despite that children's welfare has been considered in both contexts of the UNCRC and the SDGs, researchers raised concerns over issues in international policies such as the invisibility of children's roles and contributions (Croke et al., 2021) and the risk of reproducing discrimination and exclusion against certain groups (Davis and Watson, 2000). In particular, while much research has been conducted in the Global North contexts where a discourse of children's rights and equality tends to be more present in social policies, considerably less is heard about children's lives from disadvantaged backgrounds in the

Global South (Singal and Muthukrishna, 2014). These issues not only add to the misrepresentation of global childhoods to differ mainstream images of children being white, middle-class, able-bodied, and heterosexual (Curran and Runswick-Cole, 2014; Dyer, 2016; Kehily, 2010), but also the underrepresentation of local knowledge connected with cultural wisdom (Moore et al., 2005).

To explore global perspectives alternative to a Western discourse of equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in childhood studies and challenge normative and homogeneous constructions of childhoods, we propose that Chinese societies, given their unique socio-cultural, political, and historical contexts, are rather interesting and important sites of research. In current Chinese societies, different sets of socio-cultural norms often coexist when shaping children's experiences. These norms include those that embed with Chinese Confucianism values (e.g., harmony, filial piety, and hierarchy), socialistic-collectivistic orientated (e.g., solidarity, equality, and collective), and individual-oriented (e.g., individuality, individual interest, and democracy) (Yan, 2010; Hansen, 2015). Meanwhile, Chinese childhoods are also subjected to the influence of global discourses such as children's rights (Naftali, 2014) and neoliberalism (Gupta, 2018; Yang et al., 2020). In recent years, there is a growing body of literature that sheds light on the complexity of conceptualising EDI issues in Chinese childhoods. Children's perspectives, although being less heard than significant adults', are also increasingly foregrounded. For example, in the disciplines of sociology and education, while the dominance of Confucian virtues and sexual morality continues to mark topics on sex and sexuality as taboos and commonly excluded in child education (Liu, 2015), Xu (2020) invited young children from Hong Kong and Mainland China to contribute to the disclosure of the assumed 'feminisation' of early childhood education, contesting a stereotypical understanding of gender and sexuality. In her research into friendships in a rural school in Central China, Zhu (2020, 2021) indicates that children's choices of friends can be underpinned by various values, such as the Confucian and collective-oriented values of being obligated to collective interest (e.g., family's collective 'face') and 'harmony within hierarchy'; however, these norms do not always align which could cause tensions in children's everyday lives. Wang (2021) explored disabled children's experiences in mainstream schools in Shanghai and identified children's value of equal treatment and how their marginalised position was reinforced by a charity model of disability in a Confucian society and a

performative schooling culture. This Themed Edition aims to provide a dedicated space to bring together a collection of the latest research to substantially extend our knowledge of EDI issues in Chinese childhoods, especially from the perspectives of the children themselves.

We consider that two theoretical frameworks - intersectionality and transdisciplinarity - can be especially useful to embrace complexity, openness, and uncertainties in the process of producing new knowledge and insights into diverse Chinese childhoods. Intersectionality provides a 'gathering place for open-ended investigations of the overlapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and other inequalities (Lykke, 2011)' (Cho et al., 2013, p.788). When bringing intersectionality into Childhood Studies, intersectionality could work as a grounded methodological framework (Marfelt, 2016), a theoretical lens, and a politics for liberation (Konstantoni and Emejulu, 2017), which addresses the limitations of understanding childhood experiences through a singular identity. We also view the endeavour of comprising this collection as a transdisciplinary undertaking to encourage dialogues, exchange, and collaboration across disciplinary, cultural, geographical, and academic/non-academic boundaries - a methodology that is particularly relevant for taking account of diverse perspectives and solving complex societal problems (Cassinari et al., 2011). Mitchell and Moore (2018) further argued that the transdisciplinary approach would enable a more accurate understanding of contemporary childhoods and children must be recognised as the knowers, who should be indispensable in the process of co-constructing integrated knowledge and collective actions.

This Themed Edition of *Global Studies of Childhood* positions all children as agents of change for a socially-just, inclusive, and sustainable future. The notion of Chinese childhood is defined as the childhood experiences of children (of any ethnicity up to the age of 18) in Asian societies dominated by Chinese culture - Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and Singapore. Comparative studies across different cultural contexts were welcome. However, due to the limited scope of this Themed Edition, the involved articles are based on studies with children in Mainland China. Children with Chinese cultural heritage in other parts of the world are not included, while we recognise its important role in understanding Chinese childhoods. In this Themed Edition, we are very delighted to introduce six articles with a good

diversity in terms of topics, targeted groups, and locations. Through these articles, we aim to offer some insights to understand the following questions:

- How are the notions of diversity, equality, and inclusion constructed in contemporary Chinese political, social, and cultural contexts?
- How are children's voices represented in EDI issues in Chinese societies?
- How do Chinese cultures (both traditional and contemporary) shape children's and families' experiences of EDI issues?
- What are the methodological and ethical challenges in researching EDI-related issues of Chinese childhoods?

**The articles**

Children and Young people's perceptions and experiences of sexuality identity, practice, and relationships, a series of topics that are traditionally constructed as 'sensitive' and 'taboo' in Chinese social, cultural, and moral norms, have gradually attracted scholars' attention in China (Zhu et al., 2022). When exploring these topics, there is an increasing awareness of the significance of listening to young people's voices directly to let them tell their own stories. However, some groups of young people's voices haven't been paid much attention to in previous studies, such as vocational school students. As one outcome of class stratification in China's education system (Woronov, 2015), Chinese high schools are categorised as academic high schools and vocational high schools. Vocational high school students are commonly stigmatised as less talented ones who have limited opportunities to continue higher education and are likely to become workers in domestic labour-intensive industries or the lower end of the service sector. Therefore, young people in different high school categories could experience different school life, including sexuality education and the practice of heterosexual romantic relationships. Therefore, through uncovering Chinese high school students' thoughts, choices, and worries about their experiences of heterosexual romantic relationships in an academic high school and a vocational high school in Tianjin, China, in their article '*Chinese young people's diverse experiences with heterosexual romantic relationships in various high school contexts*', Chong Liu and Yan Zhu show how diverse and complex these young people's perceptions and experiences of heterosexual romantic relationships are as a result of interactional factors, such as gender and social class. Drawing on such diversity, their

work contributes to the call for more comprehensive and inclusive evidence-based sexuality education in China.

Similarly, Xumeng Xie also picked children's negotiation of sexuality identity in the Chinese context as her topic. In her article '*The (im)possibilities of queer girlhoods: Chinese girls negotiating queerness and filial piety*', Xie explores the experiences of nine Chinese girls and young women who self-identify as non-heterosexual and brings to our attention the oftentimes invisible constructions of queer childhoods/girlhoods in the mainland Chinese society. The current Chinese political context presents a regime of hegemonic masculinity that reproduces traditional expectations of being men and women in alignment with Confucian values such as filial piety and familial harmony (Xu et al., 2022). Growing up in China as a child is thus subject to explicit norms of expressing and performing gender and sexuality. Xie points to the marginalisation of queer girls and young women in and around family life, reconfirming an enduring EDI issue concerning gender equalities in Chinese childhood and beyond. As Xie and the authors (Liu and Zhu) of the above article about Chinese high school students' heterosexual romantic relationships jointly demonstrate, the power of binary constructions of gender and sexuality continues to disadvantage girls and other non-binary gender and sexual identities and experiences in China. Chinese women and girls' full participation at all levels of life as targeted by the Sustainable Development Goal 5 is suppressed starting from childhood. However, Xie also presents the agency of the participants in negotiating their embodied and situated experiences and resisting the heteronormative discourses surrounding them. The dynamic and discursive experiences shown by those Chinese girls, particularly situated in a digital age, enable a nuanced understanding of diverse girlhoods in Chinese societies. The possibilities and strategies of empowering queer girlhoods in China are what Xie inspires us for further investigation.

As an ethically and culturally diverse country, we have seen the emergence of national and local policies on multicultural and multilingual education to preserve ethnic language and cultural heritage in China. However, as pointed out by Jue Wang in her article '*Young children's negotiation of language policies and multilingual curriculum at an ethnic minority elementary school in rural China*', children's views on multicultural and multilingual education and how they respond to the policies and changed curriculum tend to remain under-explored.

The ethnographic case study centres voices from five Han and Hoche ethnic minority children in a minority language school in Northeastern China, positioning them as actors who negotiate and resist the expectations, norms, and assimilations reinforced by national policies regarding whom they should become and the transformative futures they would orient themselves towards. The stark contrast highlighted in the article sheds light on complex and inextricable challenges in the process of supporting ethnic minority children's inclusion and belonging in China, which, as argued by the author, must be dealt with through addressing power inequities in knowledge construction faced by the community to ensure their authentic participation in shaping policies and practices.

Disability inclusion is another prioritised area of current EDI development in China, through the movement of which an increased number of disabled children have been enrolled in mainstream settings. Working with 26 young children in an early year setting in Southeastern as well as practitioners and parents, Zhengli Xie, Meng Deng, and Jingyu Yuan, in their article '*A case study on peer relationships between children with and without autism spectrum disorder in a Chinese inclusive kindergarten*', specifically explored the peer relationships of children identified as living with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) by considering children's views and the key factors that influence interactions among children. The research provides useful insights into the much less known Chinese disabled children's childhood experiences in inclusive educational provisions. The discussions highlight the important roles of the significant others, including teachers and parents, in supporting inclusion, and note the impact of different discourses such as the medical model of disability and Confucianism. The authors' critical reflections on the choices of methods, predominantly influenced by disciplinary traditions, are especially valuable for fellow researchers to consider the necessity of transdisciplinarity that informs more creative and inclusive ways of breaking the silence of children's voices.

Although the ideas of children's agency and voices have been widely discussed in Childhood Studies, they are still relatively new to the Chinese context. One reason could be Chinese traditional Confucianism culture that highlights the importance of keeping 'harmony within hierarchy' (Bond and Hwang, 1986) in relationships and interactions. Such traditional cultural norms, such as filial piety, require children to be obedient and prioritise their parents'

superior status at home. However, different sets of sociocultural norms, such as the ones that embed Confucianism, the ones that show socialistic-collective orientation, and the individual-oriented ones, coexist when shaping Chinese people's interpersonal relationships, including the practice of child-parent relationships in everyday family life. Therefore, based on the self-parenting diary, in the article '*Family Childhood Spatial Conflict: A Case Study of Young Children's Adaptation to Family Rules Based on Self-parenting Diaries*', Suhua Zheng locates the interactions between himself, his partner, and his four-year-old child in their family home in economically developed region of eastern China, an important private space, to discuss children's space and practice of agency in different situations in the family. Zheng's work not only contributes to our understanding of Chinese children's agency at home in the process of negotiating home rules with parents but also raises a challenging but crucial methodological and ethical issue – parents as researchers (see also Hackett, 2016). Although this article doesn't mean to offer ethical guidance to parent-as-researcher practice, it demonstrates the unique power that parent-as-researcher could bring to our exploration of children's everyday life especially in private places, such as home. It could be used to contribute to an open discussion about the researcher's dual roles, methods, and ethics in potential studies with their own children.

Kaixin Liang, Cathy Little, and Amanda Niland also add to discussions about methods in studies with children in a Chinese context by using their work with another oftentimes marginalised group of Chinese children – rural left-behind children whose parent(s) migrant to urban cities seeking employment and financial support for families – as an example. In recent years scholarship concerning the experiences of and impact on Chinese left-behind children has expanded significantly (e.g., Ao and Aktaş, 2022; Liu, 2022; Huang and Zou, 2023) - usually presenting those children as deficit; whilst their own perspectives and voices are underheard in this body of scholarship. A possible explanation for this research gap is the methodological challenges perceived by Chinese childhood researchers when doing research with young children. In their article '*Hearing young children's perspectives: reflections on research into left-behind children's lived experience in Chinese rural area*', Liang, Little, and Niland endeavour to explore how researchers can effectively listen to Chinese left-behind children about their lived experiences in Northwestern China. They take a decolonial approach reflecting on how the popular Mosaic approach widely used in Western contexts to do

research with young children can be adapted for research with Chinese left-behind children. Through reflecting on the first author's research experiences using the Mosaic approach, Liang, Little, and Niland emphasize flexibility and reciprocity in relationships as two key contributors to the effectiveness of the Mosaic approach to research in a Chinese context. Their article will hopefully inspire more future research that includes Chinese left-behind children as co-constructors of knowledge in their own life.

**Closing remarks**

Childhood Studies in China is an important and emerging area; this Themed Edition is a good starting point to inform new and exciting work in Childhood Studies in the global context. Through this Themed Edition and our parallel research projects, such as 'Tackling ethical challenges in research with children: contextualising children's rights in China' (funded by UCL Global Engagement Fund in 2022/23) and 'International comparison studies on early childhood inclusion (with a focus on China)', we are connecting researchers who are interested in Chinese children's diverse childhoods in the worldwide to build up ongoing dialogues. Such dialogues shed light on future potential research directions. For example, authors of this Themed Edition and participants who are researchers and professionals researching or working with children in China in our ethics project, commonly mentioned that they can face a range of theoretical, practical, methodological, and ethical barriers in their work with children in China. Questions asked include how to cope with the challenges that children's views might not be seen as legitimate if they contest policy discourses? How to practice the methodology and ethics of inclusive research to avoid reproducing silence in research with children in the Chinese context? How to transform Western discourses of children and childhood in China-based research and practice? These persisting challenges still need to be addressed. Meanwhile, the editors of this Themed Edition have also noted a massive need to train and support confident and competent Chinese childhood researchers through our various experiences and a number of capacity-building workshops addressing this need are also being planned.

In the end, we would like to reflect on our experience of editing this Themed Edition and send our sincere thanks to all authors, reviewers, and the journal editorial board of *Global Studies of Childhood*. This Themed Edition started in the summer of 2021. Most of our authors are

early career researchers, such as Ph.D. candidates, who are new to academic publication. To share their fascinating work with us, they have worked diligently to overcome a series of challenges and moved forward together in this two-year journey with us. We also gained amazing support from many reviewers, who provided constructive, inspiring, and encouraging comments to support our authors. It was such a valuable experience for us, the editorial team, to work closely together with our authors and reviewers to support this scholarship development.

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