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# Why do victims remain silent? An ethical reflection on the phenomenon of school bullying in China

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## ABSTRACT

School bullying is widespread, and a common phenomenon is that those who are bullied remain silent, rather than talking about their experiences. This paper explores a case of victim silence through the recollections of a woman who was bullied at school. Drawing on Levinas' concept of the 'Other' and the notion of the 'underworld', we analyse why victims remain silent and the educational issues underpinning their silence. The study shows that children create their own world, with unique social rules and secrecy norms that exclude adults. Educators often ignore this hidden world, choosing control over listening. This paper argues for a shift from a logic of control to a logic of listening in education, where teachers welcome and respond to students as Others. In doing so, schools can foster an ethical relationship that affirms dignity and rejects bullying.

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## Introduction

Bullying is characterised by an intention to harm, repetitiveness of the behaviour over time, and a power imbalance between the two parties (Olweus 1991). Whatever its causes, school bullying is both unethical and widespread. It can be deeply harmful for young people, being strongly related to lowered wellbeing, lowered self-esteem, reduced academic success, depression, self-harm and suicidality (Anthony, Wessler, and Sebian 2010; Nazim and Duyan 2021). The Global School-based Health Survey (GSHS), which recorded health behaviours among adolescents aged 12 to 15 years from 83 countries, found that 35% of young people reported being bullied, with only small gender differences (37% boys, 33% girls) (Tang et al. 2020).

There is a growing literature on school bullying in China. In a systematic review on the issue, H. Zhang and Jiang (2022) found 67

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empirical articles that met their search criteria. Despite the Chinese government's introduction of documents such as the 2017 *Plan for Comprehensive Management of Bullying Among Primary and Secondary School Students* (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2017) and the 2021 *Work Plan for the Special Action on the Prevention and Governance of Bullying Among Primary and Secondary School Students* (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2021), which stipulate that school governing bodies and school administrators must implement appropriate measures to manage and eliminate school bullying, school bullying is still common in China. In March 2024, reports emerged from Fujian, Henan and Hunan provinces of teenagers being bullied by their classmates for years, with some even being murdered or driven to suicide (N. Wang 2024).

However, educators often become aware of the existence of bullying only after a serious incident, such as an attempted suicide or a physical attack that requires medical treatment, has occurred. Such incidents have garnered nationwide attention in China in recent years and sparked discussions on why bullying persists and how it can be prevented. The 2017 *China Education Blue Book* released survey results on school bullying in 12 high schools, middle schools and primary schools in Beijing (Y. Zhang 2017). The findings revealed that 46% of the students had experienced being intentional bumped into or knocked down, 41% had been called unpleasant nicknames and 19% had been isolated by classmates in a co-ordinated manner, with 3% of students experiencing this form of relational bullying nearly every day.

School bullying has existed in China for a long time, but has only recently begun to attract much attention and research (Chu 2017). The growth of social media has meant that many bullying incidents are now widely publicised, becoming events of ongoing national concern. In addition, with the release of bullying-themed films such as *Cry Me a Sad River* and *Better Days*, many adults have begun to recall and share online the bullying they experienced during their childhood and adolescence (Little Girl 2019; Miaomiao 2022; Yao 2024). Most of these incidents occurred without parents or teachers being aware, remaining a 'secret' among students.

Why do victims of school bullying remain silent? As noted by Japanese scholar Masakazu Mitsumura, Japan also faces the issue of school bullying that remains undetected by adults. Mitsumura argues that victims often hesitate to report bullying due to fear of retaliation, a desire to save face and a lack of trust in teachers, which can lead to more severe consequences (Mitsumura 2016). In fact, the phenomenon of victim silence in the face of school bullying is widespread: it has been noted in a wide range of countries, including Peru (Merino, Carozzo, and Benites 2011), Singapore (Ng and Rigby 2010) and the USA (Jordan and Austin 2012). This paper looks at a typical case of victim silence in the face of school bullying by focusing on a woman, now in her thirties, who

was bullied while at school. Through her recollections, we analyse the reasons behind the 'silence of the bullied' and examine the underlying educational issues.

## Theoretical framework

In our analysis, we draw on two literatures that, taken together, constitute our theoretical framework: Emmanuel Levinas' 'Ethics of the Other' and the concept of the 'underworld.'

### Levinas

Emmanuel Levinas, a prominent 20th-century French philosopher, is renowned for his core concept of the Ethics of the Other, which has profoundly influenced contemporary ethics, political philosophy, and pedagogy, among other fields. The formation of Levinas' Ethics of the Other was deeply influenced by his experiences during the Second World War. As a Jew, he endured the horrors of Auschwitz and witnessed the atrocities of the Nazi Holocaust. For Levinas, the quest to uncover the roots of societal violence and to seek a path to redemption became his lifelong philosophical pursuit.

Levinas sought the intellectual origins of social violence and war within the tradition of Western culture, particularly Western philosophy. In his view, the ontological tradition of Western philosophy is the source of this violence. He critiqued the ontological tradition spanning from Plato to Heidegger, arguing that these philosophical systems reduce and assimilate the 'Other' into 'sameness.' This indicates that traditional philosophy's ontological and epistemological pursuits of unity and sameness overlook the independence and existential significance of the Other. Levinas contended that this mode of thinking is the root cause of societal violence and the exclusion of the Other in Western culture.

Building on this, Levinas dedicated himself to reconstructing the subject. In the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas explicitly frames his philosophy as an endeavour to salvage subjectivity from the perspective of the Other. He writes:

This book then does present itself as a defense of subjectivity, but it will apprehend the subjectivity not at the level of its purely egoist protestation against totality, nor in its anguish before death, but as founded in the idea of infinity. (Levinas 2007, 26)

In other words, the subjectivity Levinas seeks to reconstruct is an ethical subjectivity grounded in the Other.

Levinas's Ethics of the Other posits that moral responsibility should be the starting point of philosophy. He argues that the core of ethical relations lies not in the self's cognition of the world, but in the I's unconditional responsibility towards the Other. Ethics does not stem from the construction of reason or knowledge but arises spontaneously from the call and response to the Other.

Within this framework, the Other should not be reduced to an object or an other but should be recognised as an existence with infinite significance. Levinas believes that this primacy of ethics represents a fundamental challenge to the ontological tradition in Western philosophy.

In the field of education, Levinas' philosophical thoughts are gradually becoming a research hotspot. Over the past few decades, numerous educational theorists have conducted in-depth studies on his thoughts, with the research achievements mainly focusing on areas such as ethics, social justice, multiculturalism and moral education (e.g. Strhan 2012).

Sharon Todd (2008) applies Levinas' philosophy to education by introducing a new understanding of the teacher-student relationship. She argues that the ethical relationship is shaped by how the self welcomes the Other, receives from the Other and learns from the Other. Todd suggests that learning is not just about acquiring knowledge, but about how the self engages with the Other and learns through that interaction. This perspective is particularly relevant to understanding the silence of bullied students, as it highlights the importance of creating an educational environment where students feel heard and respected.

Levinas' emphasis on facing the Other, respecting the Other and taking responsibility for the Other, along with his phenomenological approach to the face, provides a crucial ethical perspective for understanding phenomena such as school bullying. The silence of the bullied, to some extent, reflects modern society's neglect and suppression of the Other. Addressing bullying requires a re-examination of the relationship between the self and the Other, and the construction of an ethical culture centred on responsibility. This study attempts to apply Levinas' Ethics of the Other to the issue of school bullying, in order to analyse the ethical issues implicit in the educational phenomenon of bullied students remaining silent.

### ***The underworld***

The term 'the underworld' is a translation of the Chinese '江湖' (*jiānghú*), a word that originally referred to natural water bodies like rivers (江) and lakes (湖), representing a geographical concept. Over time, however, the term evolved to take on a distinctive cultural meaning in China.

In Chinese culture, '江湖' (*jiānghú*) represents a realm distinct from the authority of the imperial court. While the court symbolises order and centralised power, '江湖' refers to areas where the court's influence is weaker, characterised by greater freedom and looser regulations. Furthermore, '江湖' operates according to its own rules, ethics and value systems, which often stand in opposition to the official, orthodox systems of the state. It is a complex and diverse social network that brings together individuals from various classes and backgrounds. Within this realm, one finds chivalrous knights who uphold justice, bandits who

rob the rich to give to the poor, itinerant performers, street vendors and reclusive sages, among others. These figures give rise to a distinctive culture and set of unwritten rules within the ‘江湖.’

The cultural significance of the term ‘江湖’ is widely recognised in China, largely due to the popularity of wuxia novels. Authors like Jin Yong and Gu Long have created iconic images of chivalrous heroes who break free from societal constraints, wandering in pursuit of their ideals. These characters roam without fear, symbolising freedom, but this freedom also comes with uncertainty, as they have no fixed abode and face constant risks. This reflects a spirit of both resilience and solitude.

In addition to their freedom, these characters value deep loyalty and comradeship. Within the ‘江湖’ culture, emotional bonds are considered a core value, with friends and ‘brothers’ (this term does not refer to brothers by blood, but rather to friends who share a bond as close as that of brothers) bound by a commitment to share both life and death. The spirit of chivalry, or ‘侠义’ (*xiá yì*), is the heart of this culture, with heroes dedicating themselves to upholding justice, assisting the oppressed and fighting against evil and injustice. This ethos of loyalty and righteousness has become a noble moral pursuit within traditional Chinese culture, influencing the values and behaviours of countless individuals.

In this paper, the term ‘the underworld’ is used in support of the argument that children also have their own ‘江湖.’ This concept, as we use it, refers to a social world of children that exists separately from that of adults, who represent official, orthodox power structures and value systems. It highlights the existence of a children’s realm where the norms and values of the adult world are excluded or not recognised.

## Methodology

One of the approaches that has only rarely been employed in research on school bullying is interviews with adults who look back on their experiences of being bullied in school (but see Tholander, Lindberg, and Svensson 2019). In their systematic review on school bullying in China, only one of Zhang and Jiang’s (2022) 67 empirical articles was of a sample of adults for the purpose of learning about their childhood peer bullying experiences (i.e. Q. Wang 2020). Our study employs a qualitative case study of such a case to explore the research questions. As is widely acknowledged, such an approach is often appropriate when researchers seek to obtain in-depth, sensitive or complex data (Yin 2013), as is likely to be the case when exploring bullying.

Our research requires in-depth interviewing with one or more individuals who have been bullied; however, interviewing children who are currently being bullied risks causing them further harm. Largely for this reason, we opted to conduct interviews concerning the case of one adult who had been bullied in

the past. Because we focus on just one instance of bullying, our work can be characterised as an exploratory case study. For any adult, childhood bullying is often a deeply ingrained memory, and even after many years the recollection remains vivid. Additionally, because these bullying incidents are now distant from their current lives, adults may be more willing to confront, share and analyse these experiences. In addition, of course, adults often have the linguistic capacities to speak about past events to a greater extent than most children can. At the same time, we acknowledge that the mind processes the recollections of past events, so that a person's recollections of such events, especially when they have been painful, should not be thought of as if a home video or audio was played many years after being made. Humans have a natural tendency to process painful events, to try to make sense of them (e.g. Schacter 2012).

To meet the needs of our research, after complying with the process for undertaking ethically appropriate research from the first author's university, we posted an online call for volunteers who were willing to share their past experiences of being bullied in school and participate in an in-depth interview. After careful selection, we chose one respondent, Xiaoyan (all names are pseudonyms), a 37-year-old married woman with a postgraduate degree and a stable job in a public institution. The first author conducted a three-hour in-depth interview with her one afternoon in 2023. The interview was not conducted in a formal manner with the interviewer asking questions and the interviewee answering and then waiting to be asked another question, but rather as a relaxed conversation, as if between friends. The interview was held in the first author's office and there were many periods of silence, deep thought and reflection on Xiaoyan's part. During the interview, Xiaoyan mentioned her childhood best friends, Cheng and Xiaohui, so we also contacted these two men with Xiaoyan's assistance. Much shorter interviews (each about 25 minutes) were held with each of them separately to inquire about the details of the bullying that Xiaoyan experienced, to supplement Xiaoyan's recollections.

All three interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed by the first author. Each transcript was shown to the interviewee and approved by them. The transcripts were analysed, paying particular attention to why Xiaoyan, as a victim of bullying, remained silent. Victims of bullying often choose to endure the harm rather than report it to their teachers or parents. This phenomenon exposes the asymmetry that typically exists in both educational and familial relationships, even when a child or adolescent has what would generally be thought of and described as a 'good relationship' with their teachers and parents. We identify possible reasons for such silence. We then interpret these reasons using Levinas' 'theory of the Other.' Levinas argues that the Other possesses difference, uniqueness and externality. We cannot possess or assimilate the Other; we can only choose whether or not to respect and respond to the needs of the Other, taking responsibility for them, as appropriate (Bergo 2024). Levinas emphasises that encounters unfold at a precognitive level. It

seems to us that this is one of the features of his conceptualisation of the Other that makes it particularly appropriate as an interpretative framework within which to consider school bullying, given that bullies are often unable to articulate why they bully others (Fluck 2017) – a feature, we note, that somewhat complements the silence of the bullied.

### **Memories of a bullied school student**

The incidents took place in the year 2000 at a rural middle school in China. Xiaoyan was a first-year middle school girl, excelling academically, from a well-off family, and well-liked by all her teachers. She said that her cheerful personality and helpful nature also made her popular among her classmates. One day, after lunch, shortly after noon, Xiaoyan returned to the classroom with a few classmates to rest. Teachers typically started work at two o'clock, leaving the post-lunch period unsupervised. During this time, a boy named Lei, who was not enrolled at the school, entered the classroom and approached Xiaoyan directly. Xiaoyan knew of Lei as a notorious hooligan who had been expelled from school in the third year and was infamous in the town.

Xiaoyan initially had no idea why Lei approached her. As a model student, she had no previous interactions with him. However, Lei angrily threw her pencil case off her desk and began shouting insults at her. Amid the continuous abuse, Xiaoyan began to understand the apparent reason for Lei's anger. Xiaoyan had a close friend, Fangfang, from elementary school. The two girls, experiencing the first stirrings of romantic affection, often confided in each other about which boys they liked. Fangfang had a penchant for boys who were poor students, mischievous and disliked by teachers. One day, Fangfang had confided that she was being pursued by a boy and felt quite moved by his advances. This boy was none other than Lei. Xiaoyan, shocked, exclaimed, 'Isn't he a hooligan?!' She urged Fangfang to end the relationship immediately. To Xiaoyan's subsequent surprise, Fangfang had relayed the contents of this conversation to Lei.

From then on, Xiaoyan's 'nightmare' began. Every school day at about noon, Lei would come to talk to her. Trying to avoid him, she stopped coming to the classroom at noon, only to be harassed by him even more intensely before evening self-study sessions. Though Lei never physically harmed Xiaoyan, his verbal assaults and insults in front of Xiaoyan's classmates were deeply humiliating to her. Xiaoyan, overwhelmed by Lei's abusive language, did not dare to resist or try to placate him. She chose to endure silently, maintaining a stoic expression and saying nothing while he berated her. Although her classmates sympathised with her, they were too scared of Lei to intervene, though her friends tried to think of ways to help her.

A few weeks after the bullying had started, two boys, Cheng and Xiaohui, who had grown up in the same neighbourhood as Xiaoyan and were friends and classmates with her, and had some acquaintance with Lei, took the initiative to



speak with Lei on Xiaoyan's behalf. After that, Lei still came to the classroom daily but stopped his haranguing of Xiaoyan, opting instead for mocking jokes. He would then greet Cheng and leave. After about three weeks of this, Lei told Xiaoyan, 'This is the last day I'll abuse you.' After he left, Xiaoyan pretended to take a nap at her desk but instead cried quietly for a long time, only now realising how much humiliation she had endured for so long.

### **In the underworld: the educational ecology of the silence of the bullied**

From the above narrative, we can see that the entire course of the bullying, from its inception to its eventual end, took place without Xiaoyan or any other of the young people who witnessed it involving adults. Why does a teenage girl, suffering long-term bullying from someone who is not even a fellow school student, never tell her parents or teachers?

#### ***Children have their own underworld***

'Tell parents and teachers? That's unthinkable,' Xiaoyan believes. 'Children have their own underworld, one that excludes adults and belongs to children themselves.' This world has its own rules, ethics and moral system, often standing in opposition to official and orthodox rules and values. This underworld forms naturally, as children have their own concerns, such as who lost all their marbles today or what gift to give a friend for their birthday. Adults are largely uninterested in these matters. Children need to communicate and share what interests them, which brings them together, forming a small world where they can understand and confide in each other. Some of the activities that children enjoy, such as reading comics or playing video games, are labelled 'harmful' by adults and suppressed. These prohibited activities become essential aspects of interaction within the children's underworld. As their social circles expand, children encounter more secrets that adults must not know about, deepening the 'flavour' of their underworld.

The children's underworld also has an unwritten 'secrecy pact.' Despite Fangfang's betrayal, which led to Xiaoyan being bullied, Xiaoyan was still unwilling to disclose to her parents or teachers what Fangfang did. She said: 'Compared to Fangfang's betrayal, telling parents and teachers would be a greater betrayal, a more severe injustice. The children's underworld never welcomes snitches.' Xiaoyan stated that at the time she was both a good student in her teachers' eyes and a significant figure in the children's underworld. She had many close friends and a group of loyal buddies. 'Snitching' would severely damage her 'social image.' When asked why other classmates didn't report the bullying to the teachers, Xiaoyan dismissed the idea that this might be because of 'bystander apathy,' saying instead that they 'respected the victim's choice; if she

chose not to speak, she must have her reasons.’ In summary, keeping secrets from adults, as van Manen and Levering put it, is a mark of children’s independence (Van Manen and Levering 1996, 8) and a child who does not rely on adults and possesses an independent will is a prerequisite for being accepted into the underworld of their peers. This environment also provides a breeding ground for various forms of severe bullying.

### ***Resolving issues within the underworld***

In a world without adult intervention, children develop their own ways of resolving conflicts. First, children have their own ‘social code’ and use it, not the moral standards taught by adults, to judge right and wrong. Xiaoyan’s conflict with the bully was complex. Although bullied, Xiaoyan believed she was partially at fault. She said that she felt guilty for speaking ill of Lei, leading to the breakup of the relationship between Lei and Fangfang. This sense of guilt made her unwilling to report the bullying, choosing instead to silently endure the punishment, thus enabling the continuation of the bullying. The core of the ‘social code’ is loyalty, meaning reliability, trustworthiness, and never betraying or revealing secrets, which emboldens the bully.

Secondly, children possess their own ‘social wisdom.’ When deciding to face bullying without recourse to adult assistance, their social intelligence and abilities quickly develop. They learn to be mindful of what they say and do, develop strategies for resistance and endure necessary humiliations to protect themselves. In the case study, Xiaoyan assessed the risks and chose not to confront the bully or seek help but to endure silently until the bully tired, which seemed to her the wisest choice at the time.

Thirdly, children have their own social support. The children’s underworld is composed of numerous small groups, which form internal support systems for individual children. Although Xiaoyan did not seek help, she said that she did not feel entirely isolated. Her buddies Cheng and Xiaohui silently supported her. Xiaoyan believes that their mediation led to Lei eventually ceasing his bullying. This mediation involved forming a good relationship with Lei and then mentioning, ‘Xiaoyan is also our friend,’ prompting Lei to show them some favour. This method of resolving conflicts is typical of how children manage their social interactions. Fascinatingly, when we contacted those boys years later (in 2023), they had forgotten the incident. Indeed, Cheng said: ‘At that time, Xiaoyan was a girl who was kind to everyone, and everybody liked her. I don’t recall anyone ever bullying her.’ But they both agreed that if they had seen someone bullying Xiaoyan, they would naturally have stepped in, without needing her to ask for help and without anyone informing parents and teachers. As Xiaohui said: ‘We are all close friends, and close friends should support each other. If necessary,

we would even fight for our friends.’ This was Xiaoyan, Cheng and Xiaohui’s common understanding of ‘loyalty.’

### ***School: different underworlds***

Protecting children from harm, resolving their moral dilemmas and helping them navigate moral crises are responsibilities of schools and educators. But why do children, even when bullied, not seek help from educators? Xiaoyan believes that schools, parents and teachers do not care about the children themselves but about other things. ‘Teachers care about class honour, collective discipline and overall academic performance. Parents care about their child’s health, family finances and their child’s rank in class.’ If children have their own ‘*jiānghú*,’ then families, schools and educators also have theirs, with each having their implicit rules and behavioural patterns within a complex educational ecology. As the Chinese common saying goes, ‘In the *jiānghú*, one is not free to act at will.’

According to Xiaoyan, the primary goal of families, schools, and educators is for students to succeed in educational competition to gain various benefits. Xiaoyan sensed that her issues were not important to adults:

After entering middle school, I felt surrounded by an atmosphere where all adults emphasised the importance of studying. Teachers, with hoarse voices, still taught vigorously; parents left early and returned late, busy earning money to support our education. When we showed any slackness, they would use various means to motivate us not to relax. All this made me feel that being bullied by a hooligan was not worth mentioning.

In China, educators use role models, indoctrination and punishment to instil their goals in children, suppressing children’s own goals. Children understand that when educators say ‘for the sake of the children,’ they mean ‘for the sake of their academic performance and future achievements.’ This goal is so important that their current happiness is negligible. Xiaoyan added: ‘Parents and teachers are always eager to evaluate and educate us but rarely stop to listen to us. In their eyes, children have no other problems; the only problem is not studying well.’ So, while it appears that children establish a world excluding adults, in reality, it is adults’ neglect, indifference and disregard for children’s issues that drive them away.

Under institutional constraints, educators aim to solve all non-academic issues once and for all. They straightforwardly instil a set of right and wrong judgments, believing these simple rules suffice for children’s world. But children soon realise that these grand moral rules are useless in their actual social conflicts. Xiaoyan was worried that teachers would misunderstand and over-react to her problem.

If I told the teacher that Lei insulted me every noon, the teacher might say, 'How did you get involved with a hooligan?'. After learning the whole story, they might ask, 'Why didn't you tell me about Fangfang's early romance? Are you also in a romance?'.

Xiaoyan explained that the possibility of such questioning from teachers was more shameful than the bully's abuse. Xiaoyan felt that adults certainly cared about children's physical and mental safety and emphasised 'telling them immediately if something happens,' but they rarely cared about children's dignity and self-esteem. Therefore, adults' moral standards come across as external demands on children rather than as tools to help children judge what to do in situations where a moral judgement is required. These demands create anxiety in children, shackling their hearts and making them afraid to seek help for their dilemmas.

In reality, adults' worlds are also complex, with varied interpersonal relationships and unconventional wisdom, along with their own flaws and weaknesses. However, adults often present a singular moral authority to children. The contradictions between education and life force both adults and children to disguise themselves in the face of various norms, neglecting real-life dilemmas in the process. Though educators and children live together daily, each has their purposes and underworlds, and physical closeness does not equate to emotional closeness.

### **Exclusivity: an ethical examination of the silence of the bullied**

The 'Theory of the Other' proposed by Levinas can help us understand the deeper educational implications behind Xiaoyan's silence. Levinas criticised the Western philosophical tradition for its pursuit of totality and uniformity, which leads to the exclusion of Otherness. His 'Ethics of the Other' has its emphasis not on autonomy for oneself, but on justice for the Other (cf. Hu and Pu 2024). In education, the 'Theory of the Other' guides us to recognise that, for a long time, educators have not treated children as beings with Otherness. Both school and family education exhibit exclusivity in their pursuit of uniformity.

### ***The silence of the heart: Xiaoyan as the 'Other'***

Levinas uses the concept of the 'Other' to represent all that is negative and different from the subject, indicating a difference that exists in the vulnerable, which cannot be conceptualised, thematised or objectified by the 'I' (the subject). Victims of bullying often exist as the 'Other' within their peer groups. For example, a case highlighted in the research by Khanolainen and Semenova (2020) demonstrates that exclusion and bullying in schools often stem from the negation of the 'Other.' One respondent noted: 'Most likely, this boy (the

excluded character) is disliked for some reason ... In our class, there is a boy like this, and he is my friend. People dislike him because he is overweight. When we have dance lessons, no one wants to hold hands with him. So this boy (the character) has certain physical characteristics, or he is just somehow different ...' (Respondent ID-L). This case illustrates that bullying behaviour in schools often targets those who are perceived as the 'Other' due to their physical traits or behavioural differences. However, as we see in Xiaoyan's case, everyone possesses an aspect of 'Otherness,' and this 'Otherness' lies at the heart of Levinas' theory.

First, as a victim, Xiaoyan is the 'Other' within the otherwise happy life of the school. Almost every school outwardly presents an image of health, happiness and a positive, sunny school environment. The smiling faces of teachers and students in promotional displays and the upbeat songs played over the school radio all convey the message that the school ought to be (is) a place of happiness, sunshine and joy. Happiness may not be the subjective experience of the children, but rather an expectation imposed upon them. Although it was not Xiaoyan's fault that she was being bullied by Lei, being bullied signifies unhappiness, and in an environment that is supposedly brimming with happiness, this unhappiness is out of place. Xiaoyan, who was always seen as a good student and a dutiful daughter, did not want to reveal her identity as a victim to her teachers and parents. When an individual is harmed within one relationship, they often do not wish to expose this experience of harm and their vulnerability within another relationship (Gao 2021). The victim identity carries an implicit sense of shame – on one hand, the shame of manifesting one's weakness and powerlessness, and, on the other, the shame of being associated with bullies. In sum, Xiaoyan is the 'Other,' and the 'Other' is the vulnerable.

Secondly, as a victim of bullying, Xiaoyan is the 'Other' in the well-ordered life of the school. School life revolves around learning and demands a certain level of order. Bullying is a deviation, a threat and a factor that disrupts the normal educational environment. When faced with such a disruptive factor, the school's approach is typically to eliminate it as quickly as possible in order to maintain the authority of education and the normal teaching order. This approach often involves correcting the behaviour from a technical management perspective by increasing supervision and offering criticism and correction from an educational transformation perspective. These actions tend to overlook the complexity and Otherness of bullying incidents, ignoring the need to protect the 'Other' (the victim), and may themselves constitute significant psychological pressure on the victim.

Finally, as a member of the children's *jiānghú*, Xiaoyan is the 'Other' within the school's formal organisation. Xiaoyan is both a good student, recognised by the school's formal organisation, and a 'trusted friend' within the children's *jiānghú*. This indicates how even children who are acknowledged within school life still require their own *jiānghú*. However, this children's

*jiānghú* is the 'Other' in educational life. The school provides an 'ought-to-be' education, which pre-establishes a standard of what a good student should be. With this preconception and expectation, the school attempts to align children with this standard through educational discipline. Yet, real children possess 'Otherness' – they are unique, differentiated individuals who cannot be pre-defined. This 'ought-to-be' education teaches children early on to present the side of themselves that conforms to adult expectations while carefully hiding the parts of themselves that do not meet the desired standard. These hidden aspects are then shared, expressed and communicated within the children's own world. It can be said that such an education ultimately pushes children into the children's *jiānghú*, making them potential Others.

### ***The enemy of the Other: an atmosphere of uniformity in education***

The exclusion of the 'Other' is often not seen in overt verbal or behavioural rejection, but rather in the invisible rejection embedded within the overall educational atmosphere. Children are highly sensitive to the educational atmosphere. In a safe, joyful, loving and trusting environment, children freely express their opinions and emotions, revealing their most authentic selves. However, the educational atmosphere that leads to the silence of the bullied is a form of soft violence characterised by uniformity.

Modern schools in China pursue uniformity, order and sameness to enhance efficiency. This pursuit of uniformity in educational life involves incorporating every student into a framework aimed at achieving performance and results, leading to a tense and orderly environment where everyone is expected to move towards the same goals and exhibit the same behaviour patterns. This creates an atmosphere in the school akin to a quasi-battlefield, where achieving the unified goal is paramount and everything else must be subordinated to victory. Similarly, when educational goals are excessively reduced to a single focus, with an overemphasis on academic success, students naturally come to believe that their own emotions and feelings are insignificant compared to academic achievement and collective honour. The busyness of both parents and teachers also leads children to feel that their problems are unimportant. When every moment is devoted to so-called important matters and communication is seen as a luxury or waste of time, it becomes difficult to establish a healthy, dialogic educational relationship.

Because the goals are uniform, everything becomes measurable and comparable. Educators often communicate with children using evaluative language such as right or wrong, good or bad, superior or inferior, and construct educational life through methods such as merit awards, academic grading and daily behaviour evaluations. This constant evaluation places children in a perpetual state of being judged (Jiang et al. 2021). Educators attempt to create a positive

school ethos by encouraging qualities such as diligence, seriousness and cooperation in children. However, for children, this evaluative system constitutes only conditional acceptance and recognition, where all characteristics and behaviours outside this system become ‘foreign Others’ and are suppressed. The unification of multiple consciousnesses into the same thought constitutes socialisation. The folding of the Other into sameness creates an invisible form of violence.

### ***The ultimate ethical baseline: the face of the Other in educational relationships***

We can sense that the bullied Xiaoyan is subject to two forms of power: one is the ‘power of bullying’ presented to her through the law of the jungle via her bully, where the strong oppress the weak; the other is ‘educational power’ exercised by educators in their official capacity. The use of this educational power tends to view children as objects of discipline, often manifesting in a rigid, indifferent and unyielding manner (Jin 2022). This power relationship demands obedience rather than dialogue, leaving the ‘Other’ voiceless. Xiaoyan responded to both the bully and everyone else with silence.

However, silence does not mean not expressing or not speaking. Levinas points out that the ‘Other’ expresses and speaks through the ‘face.’ Here, ‘face’ does not refer to the physical visage, but rather to the vulnerable form of the Other: ‘the way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name face’ (Levinas 2007, 50).

When I face someone’s ‘face,’ my preconceived notions, my ‘ought-to-be assumptions’ about them and my demands for sameness recede, revealing their strangeness, their uniqueness, their individuality. Thus, the Other resists ‘me’ (representing all those in power) through the ‘face,’ refusing to be possessed, conceptualised, thematised or homogenised. But this resistance of the face is not a violent resistance. Levinas says:

The face resists possession, resists my powers ... The infinite paralyses power by its infinite resistance to murder, which, firm and insurmountable, gleams in the face of the Other, in the total nudity of his defenceless eyes, in the nudity of the absolute openness of the Transcendent. There is here a relation not with a very great resistance, but with something absolutely other: the resistance of what has no resistance – the ethical resistance. (Levinas 2007, 198)

This is the most vulnerable form of resistance, using the most exposed parts of the body – the face and eyes – to gaze directly and absolutely candidly at ‘me,’ seeking help from ‘me’ through their misfortune. The face demands that ‘I’ respond to the other as a dialogue partner, and response generates responsibility, which in turn creates obligation.

Therefore, Levinas says, the first word of the face is 'Thou shalt not kill' (Levinas 1985, 86–87). Similarly, the silent 'face' that Xiaoyan presents as a victim of bullying resists in silence. Her face, in this educational setting, communicates an ethical baseline in the educational relationship to 'me' (referring to the bully, to teachers and even to parents): Thou shalt not bully! Through the face of the Other, students and students, students and teachers, and parents and children naturally form ethical educational relationships, with the first utterance of this relationship being 'Thou shalt not bully.' Thus, the resistance of the face is an ethical resistance, one that resists by awakening our 'innate ethics.' Levinas argues:

In expression the being that imposes itself does not limit but promotes my freedom, by arousing my goodness. The order of responsibility, where the gravity of ineluctable being freezes all laughter, is also the order where freedom is ineluctably invoked. It is thus the irremissible weight of being that gives rise to my freedom. The ineluctable has no longer the inhumanity of the fateful, but the severe seriousness of goodness. (Levinas 2007, 200)

## Conclusion

School bullying is widespread in China and in other countries. It is often the case that school students who are bullied do not talk about being bullied with their teachers or parents, but remain silent. In this paper, we have examined, using Levinas' concept of the 'Other,' a case of victim silence in the face of school bullying by focusing on one adult woman who was bullied while at school. Through her accounts of the bullying, we analyse possible reasons for the 'silence of the bullied' and examine the underlying educational issues.

In this Conclusion, we begin by noting that while the sort of bullying recounted here is less likely to occur nowadays because of recent changes to security arrangements in Chinese schools, there may be unintended, and undesirable, consequences resulting from these changes. We then discuss, continuing to use Levinas as a framing device, how Chinese schools need to change both how they understand bullying and how they respond to it.

## *An education open to the 'Other' – addressing the silence of victims of bullying*

At the time when Xiaoyan was bullied by Lei, the gates of schools in China were unlocked during the day. Since 2019, the Chinese government has initiated security infrastructure development in schools. This involves locking the school gates and prohibiting entry to anyone other than teachers and students. Today's Chinese schools have implemented closed-campus management, aiming to eliminate all uncontrollable factors through increased surveillance. However, such changes may have unintended consequences. If education



consistently approaches issues with a logic of control, the more control that is exerted, the more silent the Other becomes; this will only result in greater educational crises. In fact, the 'silence of bullying victims' reveals the presence of the 'Other' in educational life, potentially inspiring educators to encounter the Otherness of education and the Otherness of students. Chinese educators need fundamentally to rethink their educational stance, methods, and relationships, approaching problems with a logic of listening, opening up to the 'Other' and building a more ethical educational ecosystem.

### ***Educational stance: welcoming the Other with a face of love***

If Chinese schools are to succeed in tackling school bullying, they must undergo a shift in their educational stance and alter their fundamental view of the Other. The Other represents a form of negation to the subject, but it is precisely this negation that prevents the subject from becoming trapped within itself. Emmanuel Levinas suggests that it is through the responsibility toward the Other that the subject truly becomes a subject (cf. Buddeberg 2018). Similarly, educational activities must be constructed in relation to the Other. It is through difference that dialogue becomes possible, and it is through negation that education can reflect and grow. Education without Otherness would descend into narcissism, drifting further from reality. Levinas asserts that subjectivity exists as a form of hospitality, as a welcoming of the Other. In this sense, a hospitable education is reflected in how it 'welcomes' bullying (the bully is an Other and needs to be welcomed too) and the rivalries of children.

This does not mean that schools should tolerate bullying, but rather that they may need to change their perspective on school bullying. Bullying should not be viewed as merely an obstruction or disruption to education, as something that compromises the orderly functioning of school life, thereby necessitating immediate resolution. School bullying reveals the savage nature of human beings – handling interpersonal relationships through the law of nature red in tooth and claw. One of the fundamental purposes of education is to guide individuals from a self-centred savagery towards civility, in which students learn to become part of a community. By fostering a sense of justice, an awareness of norms and laws and the ability to engage in humane interaction and reasoned argument, education helps children gradually grow into civilised and autonomous individuals.

Guiding children's moral development should not involve fighting violence with violence. Along with necessary rules, discipline and regulations, educators should channel this savage nature with the 'face of love' – savage being understood here in its etymological sense: the Latin *silva* (wood, i.e. uncivilised) giving rise to the Old French *sauvage* (wild). On the one hand, educators must 'welcome' the bullied, offering solace and care for their wounded hearts. Importantly and immediately, they should help the victim

escape the distress of being bullied and regain self-identity and confidence. On the other hand, schools must not only welcome positivity, health and brightness, but also misfortune, adversity and darkness. They must even ‘welcome’ the bullies. Bullies are often the failures of school life; they, too, are victims of an education system that lacks a ‘face of love’ and are perhaps in even greater need of help (Gao 2017). Therefore, in addition to stopping, correcting their behaviour and punishing them, education must also embrace and accept them, providing special care. Schools should help bullies find the feeling of being loved, allowing them to be recognised and accepted in school life (Gao 2017).

Strhan (2012) emphasises the importance of recognising the Otherness of each student in educational settings. In the context of school bullying, this means acknowledging the unique experiences of bullied students and creating an environment where their voices are heard. Strahan’s work suggests that educators must move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach and instead respond to the individual needs of students, particularly those who are marginalised or bullied. Education cannot be built on assumptions about ‘what a child is’ in isolation; it must always confront the real child, immersing itself in the authentic world shaped by children’s desires and impulses, their hesitations and confusions, and the complex entanglements of relationships and conflicts. Education holds the responsibility of guiding children toward a better life, and if it chooses to ignore or evade the ‘children’s *jiānghú*’ (their unique social world), it risks becoming false and merely formalistic. School education must bravely take on the Otherness of children, rather than seeking to eliminate this Otherness in the name of uniformity.

We must recognise the significance of children’s *jiānghú* for their growth. Children can rapidly develop social wisdom and acquire social skills through independently managing the entanglements of their world. Children do not only live in a homogenous, orderly environment; they also exist within a ‘community of Otherness,’ formed by diverse individuals. It is only within such a community – one that embraces difference and encourages individuality – that children can respond to others in their own voices and, in doing so, form their distinctive subjectivity.

Education should not attempt to suppress children’s *jiānghú*, but instead should open itself up, welcoming and embracing this world. It should acknowledge children’s genuine needs, such as making friends, idolising role models, and the early stirrings of emotional connections, and offer sincere understanding. By providing guidance, education can sometimes redirect children’s attention to more positive pursuits. Schools should focus on children’s small social groups, recognise and appreciate the friendships within these groups, and use them as a foundation to help children build meaningful, lasting friendships. Moreover, attention should be given to those children in disadvantaged or marginalised positions – those who are struggling, failing or socially excluded. Schools

must foster an educational atmosphere that is considerate of the weak and provide a culture that opens up to the Other, allowing the Other to be seen. This openness to the Otherness of children is a fundamental educational stance.

### ***Educational approach: responding***

As Sharon Todd (2009) suggests, the ethical relationship between teachers and students is shaped by how the self welcomes the Other. In Xiaoyan's case, the lack of such welcoming from her teachers may have contributed to her decision to remain silent. Teachers, by adopting a stance of openness and responsiveness, could have created a space where Xiaoyan felt safe to share her experiences, thereby breaking the cycle of silence.

'Responding' is a dynamic process and serves as the fundamental means by which education welcomes the Other. The responsibility of education is not to shape individuals into a fixed form, but to respond to the specific, distinctive and individual needs of each person. It is only through responding that the differences of the Other are preserved; thus, responding also signifies taking responsibility for the Other.

Education should actively respond to the problems, confusions and challenges children face in their lives, creating a space for dialogue and collective discussion about life's issues. With an open attitude, educators should enable children to share their experiences and personal difficulties, and, through understanding and guidance, explore together how to act better. Dialogue also requires educators to answer with their own voice and with sincerity, rather than simply responding with expected or normative answers.

This approach means that teachers must step out of their own '*jiānghú*' (social world), open their hearts and embrace every child. This openness is inclusive; regardless of what children express, educators must refrain from showing great surprise or panic. Openness must also be serious and respectful, without dismissing children's issues as trivial. Furthermore, this openness should be humble, requiring educators to adopt a modest posture – observing attentively, listening patiently and, at times, replacing the authoritarian stance of 'wanting to teach something' with a mindset of 'doing nothing.' Responding thus can showcase the benevolence of education, marking the dissolution of education as a power devoid of love. If educational authority means 'I can,' then a responsive education acknowledges 'I am powerless,' and only through this recognition of powerlessness does the Other emerge (Han 2017, 13). Always facing real children in specific situations, responsive education means returning to the practical essence of education.

### ***Educational relationships: no bullying***

'No bullying' is an ethical baseline in schools for student interactions and the fundamental principle for treating the vulnerable. As minors, children lack a proper understanding of the basic human rights of equality and respect, and they are often not sufficiently sensitive to bullying and harm. Bullying is not infrequently a child's instinctual way of handling interpersonal relationships. Educators must build the 'No bullying' baseline in every aspect – through law, norms, and public opinion – so that this fundamental behavioural rule is internalised and expressed in their actions.

In Edmondo De Amicis' *Heart*, the teacher admonishes the bullies, saying: 'You mock and ridicule an unfortunate person and attack someone unable to defend himself. What you are doing is despicable! It is cowardice!' (De Amicis 2009, 19). The teacher's anger awakens the children who had found amusement in bullying, establishing the ethical baseline of no bullying in the classroom.

We aspire to cultivate close teacher-student and parent-child relationships, where children feel comfortable revealing their true selves to educators, and where educators can truly 'see' children of varying personalities, situations and states. However, this closeness must be bounded by a bottom line, and that line is 'no bullying.' In educational relationships, adults are empowered, while children are the vulnerable and impoverished. This vulnerability stems not only from their physical weakness but also from their lack of rational judgment about social life – they do not always recognise what constitutes violence against themselves, nor do they always know how to resist it. Moreover, their reliance on and trust in adults may even prevent them from realising they are experiencing violence, leading them to accept adult evaluations and construct negative self-identities.

As those who hold educational power, educators and parents with guardianship rights are more likely to overstep their boundaries and engage in unseen violence. Researchers have pointed out that habitual violence and a culture of violence in Chinese adult society – such as parents disrespecting and mistreating their children, and the hierarchical thinking present in school life – are the main causes of bullying in Chinese schools today (Chu 2017). Limiting the unchecked use of educational power and advocating for democratic and egalitarian views of family and teacher-student relationships, while fostering a kind of closeness bound by ethical principles, is the best response to the issue of bullying in Chinese schools and helps answer the question of why the bullied in Chinese society often remain silent.

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