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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

 

'Self' (*ziji*), 'others' (*taren*) and 'collective' (*jiti*): Friendships at school embedded with China's Confucian–collectivist sociocultural values

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Abstract

Friendship, an important type of interpersonal relationship, has been studied in various disciplines. When studying friendship, sociologists highlight the importance of placing friendships in context to build up a connection between friendship, a type of interpersonal relationship between individuals, and the surrounding social and cultural environment. In sociological studies of friendship, children's friendships in the Chinese context have not been explored thoroughly. To contribute to closing this gap, this article places children's peer friendships in a rural Chinese primary boarding school context and focuses on exploring Chinese Confucian–collectivist sociocultural values that emerged in these children's daily practices of peer friendships.

KEYWORDS

children, Chinese school, collective, Confucian values, friendship

INTRODUCTION

In China society, Chinese people's relationships with significant others in their everyday lives are shaped by collectivist values and Confucian cultural features. As one of the important interpersonal relationships, friendships in the Chinese context should also be understood in line with collectivist values, and Confucian cultural features. Although there are some studies about Confucian friendships in existing literature (e.g. Connolly, 2012), very few studies place Chinese children's friendships in such sociocultural contexts. However, Chinese children's friendships, especially in the school context, is a

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topic worthy of study. The Chinese school setting is unique in terms of understanding the roles played by Chinese sociocultural, historical and political values in children's everyday personal lives and relationships (e.g. Hansen, 2015). For example, Chinese children's interpersonal relationships with other school peers are likely shaped by Confucian–collectivist sociocultural values that are embedded in their everyday school education (e.g. Hadley, 2003). Although both collectivism and Confucianism encompass abundant norms and values, in China's politicised moral education (Li et al., 2004) at school, some values, such as ‘submission of the individual to the “collective”’ (Woodman & Guo, 2017, p. 737), work for the collective good and support to other in-group members, were constructed as those that were consistent with both collectivist and Confucian virtues (Yu, 2008).

Although it is impossible to generalise and specify Confucian–collectivist culture values’ impact on all Chinese children's peer friendships without conducting studies in multiple Chinese settings and comparing such relationships in individualist and collectivist contexts, this article aims to provide some insights into the Confucian–collectivist values that emerged in Chinese children's practices of peer friendships at school by using a group of Primary Year 5 children's school friendship experiences as examples. To set up the context, the following sections will firstly explain the key Confucian virtues and collectivist values concerning the relationship between ‘self’ (*ziji*) and ‘others’ (*taren*) in China. The second section introduces the five-month intensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted by this project in a state-funded rural boarding primary school in China (given the pseudonym Central Primary School). Then, it discusses how the ‘collective’ (*jiti*) concept functions as a ‘bridge’ between in-group members to increase the possibility of friendship establishment, and as a ‘boundary’ between friends when children decide to prioritise the class's collective interest over individual friendships. In this section, the in-group members referred to are the children's dormitory roommates, working-group groupmates, and classmates. In school settings, Chinese children always identify themselves as members of different groups (Hadley, 2003), such as working groups, playgroups, dormitory rooms, classes, and schools. Children spent most of their school time with these in-group members to foster the sense of the ‘collective’ (*jiti*).

PLACING FRIENDSHIPS IN CONTEXTS: CONFUCIANISM AND COLLECTIVE SOCIOCULTURAL VALUES OF ‘SELF’, ‘OTHERS’ AND THE ‘COLLECTIVE’

Friendship as one important type of interpersonal relationship has been studied from multiple disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, philosophy, anthropology, etc. However, different disciplines hardly find a shared or stable meaning of friendship (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). One of the reasons that explained by sociologists is the complexity and diversity of people's contextualised understandings and experiences of friendships in various contexts. Adams and Allan (1998) define ‘context’ as ‘the conditions external to the development, maintenance, and dissolution of specific friendships’ (p. 4). A variety of ‘structural, cultural, spatial, and temporal’ dimensions constitute such context (Adams & Allan, 1998). Among these dimensions, culture's impacts on friendships have been discussed by many scholars because social interaction and relationships are affected by the ‘beliefs, values, and practices that are typically but often not universally endorsed within a cultural group’ (Chen et al., 2006, p. 4). Therefore, through reviewing cross-cultural studies on children's peer relationships systematically, such as from the perspective of individualism–collectivism, Chen et al. (2006) indicate that culture could shape children's peer relationships and interactions in various social settings, such as school. For example, Chen et al. (2006) summarise that personal autonomy and freedom during peer interactions are emphasised in Western individualist cultures; while, because of the endorsement of interpersonal

harmony and individual obligation for the group, more cooperative activities and greater self-control can be noticed in collectivism-oriented East Asian countries.

China's unique culture also has a significant impact on friendships in the Chinese context (Connolly, 2012; Hadley, 2003; Yu, 2008). In China, friendship is discussed under the broad theme of '*guanxi*' to indicate 'carefully constructed and maintained relations between persons which carry mutual obligations and benefits' (Qi, 2013, p. 309). In Chinese '*guanxi*', Chinese social identity embedded with Confucian and collectivist values plays an important role. In social identity theory, the self is 'realized in social comparison with others - sometimes individuals, sometimes groups' (Liu et al., 2010, p. 580). Since individual people are 'motivated to achieve and maintain a positive social identity' (Duffy & Nesdale, 2009, p. 122), their attitudes towards and behaviours in in-group and out-group are both shaped. As a keystone of Chinese society, Confucianism has long-term implications for that society, such as China's role-based and relational-oriented social identity (Liu et al., 2010), in both the past and the present (Wu, 2014). Confucianism is a complex system: simultaneously a political ideology, a socioeconomic system, and a religious and philosophic tradition (Yao & Yao, 2000). In terms of Confucianism's implications for Chinese people's understanding of 'self, life goals, and ways of getting along with others' (Lin & Tsai, 1996, p. 158), a collective orientation has emerged. In Chinese traditional Confucian ethics, the notion of 'self' 'assumes social intimacy' (Barbalet, 2014, p. 187), which highlights an assumption that 'individuals exist in relation to others' (Chen & Chen, 2004, p. 307). This relation-centred aspect of Confucianism makes China a 'relation-centered world' (Tsui & Farh, 1997, p. 61). In such a relation-centred world, given the great variety of relationships, a collective orientation is required to ensure that all individuals, with their differentiated roles in relationships, behave properly (Chen & Chen, 2004). Therefore, in Confucianism, the notion of 'self' has been constructed as a dual concept: individual '*xiaowo*' (small self) and collective '*dawo*' (great self). When managing '*xiaowo*' and '*dawo*', there is a collective-oriented emphasis on putting collective '*dawo*' before individual '*xiaowo*' (e.g. Barbalet, 2014), so that the individual is expected to 'sacrifice oneself for the good of a larger entity, such as family and society' (Lau, 1996, p. 360). This collective orientation is valued in Confucianism for its function of shaping every individual into a harmonious member of society and thus ensuring security, harmony and stability (Gummerum & Keller, 2008). Moreover, in the process of constructing '*guanxi*' with different others, Chinese learn to make sharp distinctions between intra-group and outgroup relations and between '*zijiren*' (insiders/in-group members) and '*wairen*' (outsiders) (Wei & Li, 2013). For example, people may feel a moral obligation to help in-group members (Gummerum & Keller, 2008).

For a long time, such collective-orientation labels Chinese society as a typical example of collectivism (Yan, 2010). In sum, the core elements of individualism and collectivism are the assumptions that: 'individuals are independent of one another' (p. 4) in individualism, and 'groups bind and mutually obligate individuals' (p. 5) in collectivism (Oyserman et al., 2002). Triandis (2018, p. 17) claims that, since 'pure' individualism and collectivism are both undesirable social patterns, there is a need to combine them. However, in China, as argued by Yan (2005), there is a biased understanding of individualism. To be specific, individualism is redefined as a focus on utilitarianism, and characterised as 'selfishness, lack of concern for others, aversion to group discipline' (Yan, 2005, p. 652). By contrast, collectivism is welcomed by Chinese society because it is believed as values that have 'positive connotations, such as enhancing group solidarity' (Wang & Liu, 2010, p. 47).

With the development of globalisation and China's reforms, Chinese traditional Confucianism and collective sociocultural values are challenged by economic liberalism and capitalist mode of production (Yan, 2010). Through exploring the Chinese case in light of Beck's theory of individualisation and modernity, Yan (2010) indicates 'the rise of the individual and the consequential individualisation of society as a reflexive part of China's state-sponsored quest for modernity' (p. 489). The Chinese

case of individualisation is unique. As claimed by Yan (2010, p. 509), during China's pathway to individualisation, individuals remain a means to the collective dream of modernisation, which 'fits well with the traditional definition of the individual in terms of its subordination to a bigger and collective entity' (p. 509). Therefore, although the norms, virtues and values of Confucianism are continuously re-constructed and re-interpreted along with China's changing political, social and cultural contexts (Wu, 2014), collective-orientation still exists. Furthermore, such collective-oriented values (e.g. solidarity in interpersonal relationships), which are compatible with both collectivist and Confucian values, are emphasised in the country's *deyu* (moral education) scheme. As an important and compulsory domain of education in China, *deyu* lasts from primary school to university and could be understood from a micro-level or a macro-level. Micro-*deyu* refers to moral education (e.g. Confucian virtues) while macro-*deyu* refers to moral, ideological (e.g. collective values) and citizenship education (e.g. individuals rights and obligations to the state) (Li et al., 2004). The focus of *deyu* is different at primary/secondary school level and at university level. In primary and secondary schools, *deyu* focuses on introducing 'social, interpersonal values (morality) and political values (ideology)' to children while it moves closer to political science at the university level (Li et al., 2004, p. 450). With such moral education, as argued by some scholars (e.g. Hadley, 2003; Hansen, 2015), in the Chinese school setting, there is a strong sense of collective orientation. For example, solidarity (*tuanjie*) and collective harmony (*hexie*) are two of the key values highlighted by teachers in terms of regulating children's attitudes and reactions in interpersonal issues with peers at school.

Such values could also be found in official educational policies and regulations. For example, values, such as 'love for the collective' (*reai jiti*), and 'solidarity with classmates' (*tuanjie tongxue*), are written in a series of regulations for primary and middle school students (1981, 1991, 1994, 2004, 2012, 2015) issued by the State Education Commission of the People's Republic of China. Apart from launching these regulations, this moral education scheme also promotes model individuals, such as the famous soldier Lei Feng (Yan, 2010). Lei Feng was a Chinese army soldier who was heralded as a moral role model for collectivism in China after his death in 1962. In Chinese schools, Lei Feng's spirit, as epitomised in his stories, is often used as a model to contribute to the children's understanding of how to be a good person for the collective. Lei Feng's spirit could be summarised in the expressions 'finding happiness in helping others', 'selfless sacrifice' and 'dedication' (Bannister, 2013). In sum, in human relationships, Chinese Confucian virtues and collectivist values construct a collective-oriented relationship between 'self', 'others' and the 'collective'. This collective orientation has been embedded in moral education schemes to educate Chinese children. In this case, as important values that constitute China's sociocultural context, such Confucian-collectivist values' impacts on children's friendships should be explored. However, in limited sociological studies that focus on Chinese children's friendships, even less attention has been placed on children's practices of friendships in the sociocultural context that embedded with Confucian virtues and collectivist values. Therefore, to contribute to developing this topic, the following sections will use ethnographic data collected from a rural Chinese primary boarding school to offer insights into Confucian-collectivist values that emerged in children's vivid experiences of doing friendships with peers at school.

METHODS

To respond to China society's concern about rural school-aged children's everyday personal lives and relationships, especially those with less family support, such as resident students and/or those with migrant parents (UNICEF, 2019), a five-month intensive ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in a state-funded rural primary school called Central Primary School in Hubei, China, in 2016. This

project focused on exploring children's understandings and experiences of peer friendships at school. Central Primary School was chosen after considering various practical issues in China-based fieldwork, such as the researcher's language capacity (local dialect speaking), relationships with gatekeepers, and local authority's attitudes towards ethical commitment (see also Heimer & Thøgersen, 2006). During the fieldwork time, Central Primary School as the biggest state-funded primary school in the local township provided compulsory education for over 300 children from 9 surrounding villages. To support children from far-away villages or families with limited capacity to guarantee children daily family support (e.g. families with migrant parents), Central Primary School offered those children residential option with free accommodation but self-paid meals. In 2016, over 80% of children were residential students and spent a long time at school during weekdays with peers from Sunday night to Friday lunchtime. As will be discussed in the following sections, spending a long time at school together has created various opportunities for children to foster a sense of 'collective'.

In the field, through using Gallagher's (2009) ethics toolkits to gain both children's and parental consent in research induction sessions, 49 Primary Year 5 children aged 11 to 13 years old (26 of them from P5(1) and 23 of them from P5(2)) were core research participants. Data collected through observations and collections of related materials significantly helped this article. Apart from observing children's interactions with each other, through observing the surrounding environment and collecting relevant materials, such as children's textbooks and school works, the researcher was able to notice embodied factors, such as sociocultural values, which shape children's friendships. For example, both observations and collections of relevant materials supported the researcher to understand Central Primary School's ways of embodying Confucian virtues and collectivist values in its everyday moral education. Like numerous Chinese schools, Central Primary School followed guidelines and directives for moral education, which are set up by China's centralised education system (see also Yu, 2008). For example, it runs a moral education module called Morality and Society (*pingde yu shehui*), and requires children to read a series of reading books on morality (*liyi duben*). In these textbooks and learning materials, 'solidarity' (*tuanjie*) and 'collective' (*jiti*) are prominent keywords. It also embodies Confucian virtues and collectivist values in campus decorations. For example, in the main teaching building, on the walls of the central stairwell, there are pictures of Lei Feng alongside stories about Lei Feng's spirit, copies of the regulations for pupils, quotations from Chinese Confucian classics about child education (e.g. *Di Zi Gui* and *the San Zi Jing*). Regarding ethnographic data management and analysis, the researcher followed Emerson and colleagues' (2011) data recording, writing, coding and analysis steps. Through close reading, coding and 'in-process analytic writing' (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 79), the researcher was able to identify promising ideas, categories, topics and themes. Amongst these coded data, Confucianism, collectivism and collectivist ideas of the 'self', 'others' and the 'collective' emerged as important factors that shape P5 children's peer friendships at school significantly.

In the ethnographic fieldwork, one of the biggest challenges was the balance between 'closeness' and 'distance'. In this research, as a Chinese person who grew up in Mainland China, the language, culture and knowledge of Chinese school life helped the researcher to easily understand my research participants and the surrounding contexts. However, at the same time, this 'closeness' presented the researcher with the challenge of maintaining good 'sensitivity' with which to recognise and question certain 'taken-for-granted' social and cultural phenomena and values in data collection. In this case, together with continuing reflexivity (e.g. via research diaries and discussions with external audiences) in the field (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003), previously read literature on subjects of friendship studies offered the researcher a 'lens' to do the observation, recording and analysis. For example, being inspired by Adams and Allan's (1998) idea of placing friendship in four levels of context (personal environment level, network level, community or subcultural level and societal level) to understand,

the researcher was sensitive in terms of reflecting and identifying embedded societal factors, such as sociocultural moral values and social-political structures, in the Chinese context.

Although there is a close connection between the researcher and the research setting's Chinese Confucianism and collective sociocultural values, the researcher's identity as an outsider cannot be ignored. School, as a collective-oriented institution, conducts the duty of providing children moral education, values and awards obedience to such Confucian–collectivist moral values. In this case, when working with the researcher, an outsider who might 'judge' school's moral education progress and children's performance of moral development, it was possible that both children and teachers managed their behaviours, following the 'desirable' moral requirements, in front of the researcher intentionally. For example, during the participant recruitment period, in conversation with the children, the researcher became aware that when the researcher was not present, their teachers broke the ethical agreement not to intervene in children's decisions. These children were encouraged to join in the research to show the researcher their cooperative spirit (*hezuo jingshen*) and their willingness to help people (*leyu zhuren*) because their participation was not only for themselves but also for the good impression it would create of their class and the entire school. In this case, apart from the consequences of bringing ethical challenges (e.g. the researcher had to use additional approaches to continuously check children's consent during the entire fieldwork time), it was possible that when children and teachers talked about and dealt with issues about Confucianism and collective sociocultural values, they might exaggerate their belief to such values.

In the following sections, this article will use ethnographic data to provide some insights into the Confucian–collectivist values that emerged in Chinese children's friendships with school peers. Although it is impossible to generalise and specify Confucian–collectivist culture values' impact on all Chinese children's peer friendships without conducting studies in multiple Chinese settings and comparing such relationships in individualism and collectivism contexts, this article's findings could inspire future work. For example, a further study could compare children from different types of schools and different social cultural contexts to further explore social cultural values' impact on children's peer friendships. In this study, the boarding school context was a unique setting. Because of a lack of family support, boarding school settings could easily foster a sense of community which can further contribute to the development of a collective sense between inside members, such as teachers and students (Hansen, 2015). For example, residential children might rely more on connection with school peers and teachers than day students.

THE IDEA OF THE 'COLLECTIVE' (*JITI*) IN CHILDREN'S FRIENDSHIP EXPERIENCES

Besides involving these Confucian virtues and collectivist values in the teaching content, children's textbooks and school decorations, Central Primary School runs various moral educational activities, such as an annual project in March called Learning from Lei Feng Month. In 2016's Learning from Lei Feng project, the children wrote essays about what they had learned from Lei Feng's spirit. As emerged after analysing their essays, the text quoted below can represent the majority of the children's points about the relationships between 'self', 'others' and the 'collective' to which they all belonged:

[...] I will learn from Lei Feng to try my best to do all things, to selflessly help my classmates, to actively participate in events organised by my class, and the school to win more points for my working group, my class, and my school... I will learn from Lei Feng, to

work with my classmates to build up a better class and contribute to helping our school to become better and better. (Yiming, a P5 boy, March 2016)

In this quotation, as in other children's essays for the Learning from Lei Feng project, the frequent occurrence of the words 'my working group/class/school' indicates these P5 children's strong sense of identifying the 'self' with the 'collective' to which the 'self' belongs, and emphasises the self's commitment to the collective good. The following subsections will focus on how the idea of the 'collective' (*jiti*) functions as both a 'bridge' and a 'boundary' in friendships between children and their peers at school.

SHARED IDENTITY AS A MEMBER OF THE 'COLLECTIVE' FUNCTIONS AS A 'FRIENDSHIP BRIDGE' BETWEEN INDIVIDUALS

In the field, when nominating friends, all P5 children chose the majority of their friends from their own classes. As in-group members of a shared 'collective', children have abundant opportunities to engage in frequent interactions. Children in the same working group can be used as an example. Central Primary School used a group-based work model to manage children's everyday school lives. Children in each class were required to group themselves into working groups (each group had around 6 members). Children in a working group were required to participate in almost all school tasks together as a group. Hence, they were always spatially close to each other during school time. They were seated together by teachers in the classroom and the canteen, besides queuing up together to take meals and attend the school's daily gymnastic exercises. Consequently, apart from formal interactions to carry out school tasks (e.g. working on a group academic project), this spatial closeness caused children in the same working group to easily develop frequent casual and fun interactions. For example, in classroom-based observations during class break times, it was very often observed that some children stayed in their seats to engage in chat and brief games with peers sitting near them, who were very likely groupmates. These children explained that they preferred to play with those sitting nearby when they felt too tired to move or had only a short break time. As noted by Corsaro (2003), sharing activities and interactions daily over a while is a very important part of children's friendship-forming processes. Therefore, as noted by many P5 children, these frequent interactions between them and their groupmates created opportunities to get to know each other well and then to befriend the ones they liked.

Furthermore, several children particularly mentioned an intimate friendship with their 'deskmate' (*tongzhuo*), the working groupmate with whom their desks were put together, and the roommate with whom they shared mattresses. Since Central Primary School also has a very limited number of dormitory rooms, it has only 10 dormitory rooms for more than 200 residential students. Each dormitory room has 5 to 6 bunk beds for around 20 students, which means that most residential students share a mattress with another same-sex classmate. Therefore, the roommates with whom children share mattresses are even closer to them spatially, which might make it even easier to notice their needs and offer support. For example, as recalled by Ting and Zilin, two P5 girls who shared a mattress, the mutual emotional support they offered each other at night was one important factor encouraging the progression of their relationship from that of roommates to that of intimate friends. Since these P5 children regarded the display of negative emotions (e.g. crying) in a public area (e.g. classroom) as improper and shameful behaviour, crying quietly under the duvet in the evening was commonly reported by these P5 children as a way of releasing negative emotions. This is true in the case of Zilin and Ting. As Zilin explained, since Ting was a child of migrant parents, she sometimes cried under the duvet

when she missed them. In these situations, Zilin said that she would always ‘comfort her by using my hands to stroke her back upward and downward [...] quietly and keep it [Ting's cry] secret [from other peers]’ (Field note, 3rd May 2016). Since Ting offered Zilin similar emotional support when she was upset, these two girls increasingly developed a feeling of shared emotional intimacy, as the ‘ones who were always there for each other’, even at night (Field note, 3rd May 2016). In other stories about developing intimate friendships with deskmates, children frequently attributed their emotional intimacy to the appreciation of their deskmates’ role of promptly noticing their difficulties (such as running out of pens, finding coursework difficult, or feeling unwell) and responding quickly to support them. These examples provide further evidence that spatial closeness between in-group members of a shared ‘collective’ can contribute to the establishment of friendship.

Apart from the above-discussed positive influences of spatial closeness and frequent interaction, a Confucian–collectivist sense of having an obligation to serve other in-group members, to show care and concern for other in-group members, and to be responsible for those in-group members’ accomplishments and difficulties (Gummerum & Keller, 2008) promotes the creation of friendship between children and peers in the same ‘collective’. This interpersonal responsibility between in-group members is viewed as a moral obligation to others, in keeping with China’s system of moral rules (Keller, 2006), and with the model of Lei Feng as an ideal individual in China’s moral education system. In the field, these P5 children commonly showed internalisation of the need to perform such interpersonal responsibility by ‘caring about’ (*guanxin*) and ‘helping’ (*bangzhu*) other in-group members through both words and actions. An episode in which children spontaneously raised money for Tao, a P5 boy, is evidence of this. It was chosen as an example because, as a significant episode taking place over the course of days, involving all children from Tao’s class and some children from other classes, it gave the researcher more opportunities than other, similar episodes to combine observations with follow-up chats with children.

Tao’s family had suffered hardship when his father required urgent medical treatment in 2016. Two months in hospital and the initial surgery cost Tao’s family a large amount of money. Unfortunately, the result of the first surgery showed that it had not been fully successful and Tao’s family could not afford the second expensive operation. After one classmate from the same village as Tao learned about his family’s hardship and spread this sad news in class, children from Tao’s class spontaneously raised money for Tao. This collection involved all Tao’s classmates as donors and many of them as enthusiastic fund-raisers as well. Children in Tao’s working group undertook most of the work of organising the collection. These groupmates helped Tao to count the amount of donated money, to record the names of donors, along with the amount of money each had donated, and to maintain order among the donors (e.g. by encouraging them to form a queue and donate one at a time). In addition to Tao’s working groupmates, many other Tao’s classmates acted as fund-raisers by using their networks at school to ask children from other classes to donate to Tao. Moreover, children from different classes but in the same dormitory room, clubs or village as Tao also donated and raised funds through their own networks at school. In their donation requests, Tao was defined as a member of their dormitory room, activity club or neighbourhood. Through such fund-raising, in the end, Tao received donations not only from all Tao’s classmates but also from some children from different classes (Field notes, 28th and 29th March).

In follow-up chats with children who were enthusiastically engaged in supporting Tao, the most common answer to questions about their motivation for caring about and helping him was ‘Tao is “one of us” (*women zhong de yi yuan*)’. The phrase ‘one of us’ straightforwardly suggests a collective recognition of Tao’s identity as an in-group member of a ‘collective’ to which they belonged in common with him (e.g. class, working group, dormitory room, activity club or neighbourhood).

Another significant characteristic of their motivation that emerged in chats was that it was most likely morality-driven. For example, when the researcher thanked them for their kindness, apart from the phrase ‘This is what we should do’, a moral idiom ‘Helping others makes one happy’ (*zhuren weile*) from Lei Feng’s spirit (Bannister, 2013) in the Chinese moral education scheme was frequently offered by many of them to modestly downplay their kindness. Although it might be argued that such a reaction represented an attempt to seem like the ‘ideal’ child who ‘has high moral character, and is prosocial, group-oriented, and modest’ (Xu et al., 2006, p. 273), the moral character that emerged cannot be denied, as it could also be observed in their other reactions. For example, such a morality-driven orientation can be recognised in some children’s altruistic attitude towards exchanging favours (*renqing*) and reciprocity (*huibao*) between themselves and Tao. In observations, when Tao announced to the donors that he would repay their kindness and insisted on recording their names, not all donors agreed. Some of them just dropped the money on Tao’s desk quickly, then disappeared into the crowd. Others refused with the words ‘You do not need to; this is what I should do’. Besides these observed reactions, according to Tao, in the following days, he kept finding anonymously donated money in his desk drawer. Therefore, it could be argued that, although Chinese relationships, such as those between classmates, are generally viewed more in terms of reciprocity than of obligation (Zhang & Zhang, 2006), the sense of being ‘in-group members’ (*zijiren*) of the ‘collective’ (*jiti*) under the Confucian–collectivist values system could give these Chinese children a morality-driven feeling of being obligated to help other in-group members to cope with their personal difficulties.

In Chinese relationships, offering assistance can serve not only instrumental but also emotional functions (Qi, 2013). In the process of helping a group member in need, the relationship between the children involved might be strengthened (Zhang & Zhang, 2006) with a stronger emotional bond. In some cases, this added affectivity can upgrade an ordinary interpersonal relationship (e.g. a classmate relationship) to a more intimate one, such as friendship. Such upgrading is evident not only in the above-discussed case of Zilin and Ting but also in that of Tao. For example, Tao nominated a couple of male groupmates as ‘friends who warm me in my difficult time’ in the following week’s Chinese course essay; in observations, their interactions at school became closer, as suggested by signs such as increasing frequency of interaction and intimate body language.

Upgrading of relationships from in-group membership to friendship not only happened between same-gender peers. A couple of children told stories of developing cross-gender friendships with other opposite-gender in-group members. For example, two P5 girls, Qian and Taozi, related how they both had the opportunity to build friendships with a couple of male classmates in the process of cooperating with them during the training courses for cross-school academic or sports competition events. In these courses, the girls and boys got to know each other while spending a lot of after-class time together. However, unlike other cross-gender interactions, which were easily teased by other peers, cooperating in tasks for the collective interest prominently functions as a powerful source of ‘heterosexual teasing-free interactions’ because such interactions were for a reasonable and honourable purpose (e.g. winning class and school collective awards), and peers who made fun of such cross-gender interactions would be criticised by teachers.

In sum, this subsection discusses how the idea of ‘collective’ (*jiti*) functions as a ‘bridge’ to link individual in-group members together and strengthen their interpersonal relationships, with a consequent positive influence on the establishment of friendships between in-group members. However, this does not mean that the ‘collective’ (*jiti*) idea can always benefit individual children’s friendships at school. In fact, in some cases, the idea of prioritising the ‘collective’ (*jiti*) over the ‘individual’ (*geren*) might create boundaries between friends.

HOW DOES THE IDEA OF PRIORITISING THE ‘COLLECTIVE’ (*JITI*) OVER THE ‘INDIVIDUAL’ (*GEREN*) SHAPE FRIENDSHIPS BETWEEN INDIVIDUALS?

As discussed previously, in Confucianism, the collective ‘*dawo*’ (great self) is placed above the individual ‘*xiaowo*’ (small self), which means that individuals are expected to submit themselves to the ‘collective’. This collective-orientation is further strengthened by the Chinese Communist Party in its process of propagandising the social values of collectivism (Yu, 2008). As children growing up in such a context, the idea of prioritising the ‘collective’ (*jiti*) over the ‘individual’ (*geren*) can create a ‘boundary’ between children and friends when they belong to different groups with conflicting interests.

Like other Chinese schools, a points-earning/ranking competition system was used in Central Primary School to record, measure and rank children’s everyday performance at school through adding or deducting points for good or bad performance respectively (Bakken, 2000). Because this system of competition was closely linked with the group-based work model, children’s performance could add/deduct points not only in their individual accounts but also in groups’ accounts (e.g. class and working group) to which they belong. Thus, in the field, I have observed episodes of conflict arising between friends when they belonged to different groups (e.g. working group or class) with conflicting interests as competitors. Among these episodes, the occurrence of 13th May 2016 is a typical example. It illustrates not only conflicts between friends from different classes but also cross-gender cooperation between boys and girls in the same class. Therefore, besides being used as evidence of the present argument, it can echo the point made previously, about how the ideas of the ‘collective’ and ‘in-group members’ challenge the gender boundary to bring boys and girls together in the collective interest.

On 13th May 2016, during the dinner break, I was invited by P5 (2) girls to go to the dancing room to observe their rehearsal of the dancing program for the ‘2016 Children’s Day Show’. In China, 1st June is Children’s Day. As tradition dictates, the school would organise an entertainment event called the ‘Children’s Day Show’. Each class was required to prepare an entertainment program (e.g. dancing, singing, and drama) to perform in the show. After the show, teachers selected the three best performances and awarded points to the classes to which those performers belonged. Since the points contributed to a class’s performance at the school level points-earning/ranking competition (the class with the highest points was always awarded the title of ‘outstanding class’ at the end of each month), children were very excited and eager to help their own class prepare an outstanding program. In preparation for the show, a group of girls in P5 (2) had been practising dance in the dancing room during the long break time between dinner and evening self-study. This dancing room was constructed as a ‘boy-free’ area because all the girl dancers claimed that they felt embarrassed when making certain physical movements, such as stooping down or jumping high, in front of the boys, as they thereby risked exposing their bodies. Therefore, these P5 (2) children devised several strategies to ensure that the girls had a comfortable environment in which to practice. For instance, they had classmates stand guard to protect the dancers from the boys, as outlined in this example.

When I arrived, I found that the girls had already started their practice. I was surprised to see Wei, a P5 (2) boy, sitting in the hallway outside the dancing room window. When I chatted with Wei, he explained his role as a “guard”, with a duty to ‘stop all the boys and girls from the other classes coming up to the window’. He did this for two reasons: to ‘protect girls in my class [because] some boys like to watch them’ and to ‘protect our class’s program from being learned by other people in other classes [because] the

competition is intensive'. While we were chatting, four boys from P5 (1) and two boys from P5 (2) appeared on the stairway. Ouyang, a P5 (1) boy, was among them. He and Wei were mutually nominated close friends, who had begun their friendship when they were in kindergarten. Since the dancing room was just next to the stairway, when Ouyang saw Wei and me and heard the music from the dancing room, he laughed and shouted: 'Some people are dancing!' Then he started to walk towards the dancing room, followed by the other boys. Wei shouted: 'Do not come! You cannot see it! It is my class's girls in practice.' Then he stretched out his arms to try to block the hallway and stop the boys from passing. However, it was difficult for Wei to block all these boys by himself, so he shouted angrily at these two P5 (2) boys: 'What's wrong with you? Come and help! Aren't you still one of our class?' When the two boys heard this, they turned around to help Wei stop other P5 (1) boys. At this point, Ouyang looked at Wei and said: 'We are all brothers; just allow me to see it for one second!' But Wei continued to refuse, saying firmly: 'No, they are girls in my class.' The disturbance involving these boys attracted the attention of other children passing down the stairway. More and more children from different classes started walking curiously towards the dancing room. Wei became flustered; he knocked on the window and shouted: 'People are coming!' The girls in the dancing room stopped practicing immediately, opened the window, and angrily shouted at the children outside, saying that they would report them all to teachers if they did not leave. I noticed Ouyang's upset facial expression and the angry glance he gave Wei over his shoulder as he left (Field note, 13th May 2016).

In this episode, Wei's reactions, such as warning and stopping P5 (1) boys and demanding that other P5 (2) boys support him by reminding them of their collective identity as members of class P5 (2), suggested his strong emphasis on his identity as a member of P5 (2). Therefore, from Wei's perspective, although Ouyang was his friend, Ouyang was also a boy who was unwelcome in this 'boy-free' dancing room, and a member of another 'class collective' (*ban jiti*) which was a competitor in the Children's Day Show. In this case, allowing Ouyang to see the girls' dance risked not only embarrassing the girls and disturbing their practice but also leaking the details of P5 (2)'s program to P5 (1). Thus, even though Ouyang tried to convince Wei to make an exception because they were 'brothers', Wei's attitude did not change, as indicated by his firm refusal to Ouyang. Wei's choice of sticking to his role of guard rather than making an exception for Ouyang as a 'brother' suggests that he prioritised P5 (2) class's collective interest over his individual relationship with a friend. And since Wei's behaviour of prioritising the 'collective' (*jiti*) over the 'individual' (*geren*) disappointed his friend Ouyang, their friendship could, to some extent, be influenced negatively.

The above observation also helps to explain why interactions between friends from different classes decreased during the period of preparation for the Children's Day Show. Although children chose the majority of their friends from their own classes, many of them also had friends from other classes (e.g. friendships developed with other types of shared identities, such as neighbours or previous kindergarten classmates). After class, children were frequently observed running to other classrooms to visit their friends for a chat or to play in the hallways together. However, the frequency of visits between friends from different classes dropped significantly during the period of preparation for the Children's Day Show. During this period, the hallway remained relatively quiet and empty after class, with the children spending more time in their own classrooms, doors shut and curtains drawn, discussing and practising their programs. This action might be understood in the light of Wei's comment that he had to prevent people in other classes from learning about his class's ideas for the show. In that case, the children would tend to keep at a distance from friends from other groups to avoid any suspicion that

their close interactions were undermining class's collective interest. Thus, it might be argued that the collectivist attitude of working towards the collective good of one's group can create a 'boundary' between friends from different groups.

In the field, apart from these episodes related to Children's Day, some other episodes also reflected the negative influence on individuals' peer friendships of the value of prioritising the 'collective' (*jiti*) over the 'individual' (*geren*). In these situations, a particular group of children — student leaders — emerged as significant. China's student leader system is a heritage from the Soviet Union to foster students' sense of collective and obedience (Shen, 2012). Student leaders were a group of children, elected by peers and appointed by teachers to participate in daily student management (e.g. supervising fellow students' behaviours). They were required to give priority to the class's collective good and service to teachers and fellow classmates. Therefore, as several student leaders complained, this position, in some cases, threatened their individual relationships with friends (Author, forthcoming). For example, heavy workload (e.g. supervising peers) reduced the time they had for playing with friends then threaten their friendships.

CONCLUSION

This article has discussed Confucian–collectivist sociocultural values, such as the need for individuals to submit themselves to the 'collective' to contribute collective good and serve other in-group members, that emerged in P5 Chinese children's practices of friendships at school. Through reviewing constructions of the relationship between 'self', 'others' and the 'collective' in China's Confucianism and collectivism, this article argues that the collective orientation in Chinese children's understandings of relationships with others is a result of the transmission of Chinese traditional culture and encouragement of national moral education scheme (Li et al., 2004). By introducing the way Central Primary School incorporated moral education in its courses, events and school decorations, this article indicates that a strongly collective-oriented environment was constructed in this school context. In such a collective-oriented environment, a shared collective identity as members of the same 'collective' (e.g. class) encouraged spatial closeness and frequent interactions between in-group members (e.g. classmates), fostering in them the belief that the individual should prioritise the collective good over personal needs and support other in-group members. Therefore, such collective orientation has had a significant influence on these P5 children's experiences of peer friendships at school. On the one hand, it contributes to the creation of friendships between in-group members by ensuring opportunities for them to get to know each other during frequent interactions, and strengthening the affective bond between them in the process of mutual help. On the other hand, since obligations to the collective and the requirements of prioritising 'collective' over 'individual' could cause tensions between individuals, such collective-oriented value might restrict children's friendship experiences. In this case, 'collective' (*jiti*) could function as both a 'bridge' and a 'boundary' in these Chinese children's friendships with peers at school.

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