

**Children's agency in peer relationships: exemplifying
Chinese Left-behind Children**

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Abstract

This multi-method qualitative research explores Chinese Left-behind Children's (LBC) relational agency in their peer relationships within school and family settings. It aims to challenge stereotypes by viewing LBC as active social agents rather than passive recipients of the negative consequences of parental migration.

The research addresses 3 key questions: 1) How do Chinese LBC enact relational agency in their peer interactions? 2) What are the relational constraints imposed by others, including peers and adults, in the context of Chinese LBC's agency in peer relationships? 3) How do Chinese LBC react to these constraints in their peer interactions?

Relational agency, relational constraints, and children's capacities for negotiating and justifying social norms with peers are central conceptual elements informed by theories from the sociology of childhood and broader sociological frameworks. These elements guided the research questions, shaped interview prompts, and structured the 3 empirical chapters corresponding to the research questions.

Qualitative data were collected from 16 participants aged 9 to 16 through online and in-person interviews, as well as text and audio messages on WeChat, between March 2022 and October 2023. Online interviews and instant messages on WeChat were the primary data sources, supplemented by WeChat Moments posts and in-person interviews to enrich the analysis. Narrative, discourse, and thematic analyses were applied sequentially to examine the data and organise the empirical findings.

Chapter 5 focuses on how Chinese LBC enacted agency in their peer relationships. Chapter 6 analyses the relational constraints they faced, emphasising the dominant influence of adult-imposed norms on their interactions with peers. Chapter 7 explores LBC's responses to these constraints, highlighting their strategies for negotiating normativity and justifying social behaviours among peers. Their responses to relational constraints are understood as another expression of their relational agency.

This research: 1) challenges stereotypes about Chinese LBC by focusing on their agency rather than their vulnerabilities; 2) contributes to the social

construction of children's agency by adopting a relational approach; and 3) broadens the understanding of children's agency by situating it within the Chinese context.

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Glossary

Hukou 户口 : household registration system

Nongcun liushou 农村留守: LBC who live in rural China

Chengshi liushou 城市留守: LBC who live in urban China

Yang liushou 洋留守: LBC who live in China while their parents migrate abroad

Tinghua 听话: being obedient to adults/authority

Guanxi 关系: enduring social network

Renqing 人情: social reciprocity

Mianzi 面子: face

Mulaohu 母老虎: a tigress or a shrew

Gaokao 高考: National College Entrance Examination (NCEE)

Banweihui 班委会: class committee

Banzhuren 班主任: homeroom teacher

Chibang yingle 翅膀硬了: being fully-fledged, mentally independent and refuse to obey experienced seniors who represent authority

Zhangxiong wei fu zhangsao wei mu 长兄为父, 长嫂为母: the eldest brother in a family must take care of the younger ones just like a father, and his wife must play the maternal role

Juanwang 卷王: the ultimate king of involution (involution in Chinese characters: 内卷, which is another entry of glossary below)

Xueba 学霸: top student or academic overachiever

Bailianwang 百炼王: having strong hearts and Buddha-like mindset while facing overwhelming situations

Neijuan 内卷: involution; individuals or groups invest increasing effort without achieving corresponding benefits or progress

Doubi 逗比: literally means funny idiot

Wairen 外人: non-family member; outsider

Kedaibiao 课代表: course representatives

Sheng qi yishi 升旗仪式: flag-raising ceremony

Zaolian 早恋: early dating among young people from elementary and secondary schools

Shang you zhengce xia you duice 上有政策, 下有对策: where there is a rule, there is a workaround

Yiri wei shi zhongsheng wei fu 一日为师, 终身为父: once your teacher, forever a father figure

Zun shi zhong dao 尊师重道: respecting teachers and value the way they teach

Fa bu ze zhong 法不责众: the law does not hold the masses accountable

Abbreviations

LBC: Left-behind Children

UNCRC: the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

NCEE: National College Entrance Examination

DBS check: Disclosure and Barring Service Check

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 From vulnerabilities to strengths: shifting the research focus of LBC

Since the 1990s, Left-behind Children (LBC) in China have gained significant attention in both academia and society due to the country's large-scale internal migration of rural workforce supporting the fast development of cities (Shangguan, 1993; Shangguan, 1994). As LBC's parents move to urban/more developed areas and even abroad in search of better job opportunities, millions of children are left at home, often under the care of grandparents or other relatives (Zhou, et al., 2017) due to reasons, such as restrictions of household registration system¹ and the high costs of migrating together with children. This situation has attracted widespread attention from the Chinese society, for instance, involvement of charitable entities in aiding LBC (Huang, 2024). The central government also has successively introduced relevant policies since 2016 to support the healthy development of Chinese LBC (Hung, 2023). There is a growing academic interest in the issues and development of LBC, also reflecting a rise in attention toward this demographic.

Traditionally, LBC have been viewed through the lens of vulnerability in academia and society, with researchers emphasising the psychological and developmental challenges they face after parental migration (Ge et al., 2019). These challenges include emotional neglect, mental illness, academic underperformance due to insufficient parental care (Li et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2020; Lin et al., 2024). However, such a focus has often overshadowed the children's own capacities for relational agency. Such approaches, while valuable in highlighting the challenges faced by LBC, often overlook their strengths and capacities for agency. Meanwhile, when shifting paradigms in researching Chinese LBC, sociological approaches tend to focus more on the macro structures in China, such as migration related economy and policies (Ge et al., 2019). Thus, this research takes a different approach by prioritising LBC's abilities and strengths over their vulnerabilities, and children's voices over relatively macro narratives utilising sociological approaches. Particularly, I aim to shift the narrative by viewing LBC as active social agents, particularly in their interactions with peers.

¹ Also known as the *hukou* system. In Chinese characters: 户口制度. It is often considered as the main threshold preventing migrants from living with their children (Ren et al., 2020).

Agency, in this context, refers to the social capacity of individuals, especially LBC, to make their own decisions (Bushin, 2009; Monson et al., 2021) within their specific social context and environment. In the sociology of childhood, children's agency has been a key area of focus, particularly in how children exercise agency within adult-dominated environments (Mayall, 2013). However, in the context of LBC, this aspect remains underexplored, with findings focusing more on the role social structure and culture plays in shaping LBC's lives (Xiao, 2015b), grounded in Giddens's model of structuration (Valentine, 2011). This study, however, shifts the focus to the children themselves, exploring their perspectives and experiences in their peer relationships by incorporating insights and debates on child agency. In prior LBC studies emphasising LBC's interpersonal relationships, child-parent and student-teacher relationships seem to have been more extensively researched, compared to child-child relationships (Liu et al., 2020; Zhang and Deng, 2022; Ye and Wang, 2024). Thus, the exploration of children's agency, especially within their peer relationships, is imperative for understanding how competent they are in their socialisation when LBC have traditionally been seen as passive recipients of their daily living circumstances in most of the prior LBC studies. This research aims to highlight their active role in shaping their own lives and social relationships with peers to de-stereotype and de-stigmatise LBC in China in both academia and real-world.

1.2 Grounding LBC's agency in peer relationships when addressing adults' influence in both family and school settings

Peer relationships play a crucial role in children's social development, serving as an important arena of their social development (Corsaro and Eder, 1990). This research situates children's peer relationships within family and school settings by examining the experiences of Chinese LBC in the context of their current living conditions following parental migration. Family and school are considered the primary contexts in which Chinese LBC spend most of their time interacting with peers. The family structures of Chinese LBC are reshaped by parental migration, as they are often left behind but within the care of surrogate parents, usually grandparents, alongside with their siblings or cousins (Xiao, 2015b). However, little is known about LBC's social interactions with their siblings and cousins, who may function as peers within the family context.

Meanwhile, Chinese LBC, like many other non-LBC, spend long time with their peers in school considering long school hours in Chinese schools (Gu et al., 2017b). The boarding arrangements (Liu and Villa, 2020) and the after-school services (Pi et al., 2024) provided for LBC in Chinese schools have further extended the time they spend with peers in school settings. While community contexts can contribute to shaping children's social relationships, including peer relationships, they are not the focus of this study due to their relative instability and fragmentation resulting from ongoing internal migration in Chinese society (Chan, 2010).

Despite the importance of peers and LBC's close connections with them, the agency of Chinese children also remains underexplored in existing research. The focus on agency in peer relationships allows a deep exploration of how LBC navigate their social worlds after parental migration. This research, therefore, addresses an important gap in prior literature by examining the multiple dimensions of Chinese LBC's agency within peer relationships, disclosing how they might navigate relational constraints and negotiate social norms mostly embedded in these relational constraints in both family and school environments involving peers. By doing so, this research also expands our understanding of children's social agency in non-Western contexts.

Other than children themselves, adults remain dominant figures in children's peer relationships. Family and school are recognised as two adult-led institutional settings in this research, which are inseparable from children's peer relationships. These environments heavily influence and shape the dynamics of children's peer interactions, making it impossible for children's peer relationships to be entirely detached from the influence of adults in these institutions. Adults' position in children's peer relationship provides a rationale for uncovering the hidden relational constraints causing children's silences that they might experience when exercising their agency with peers. For instance, in Chinese schools, some teachers were found to subtly reinforce social hierarchies by favouring local students over rural migrant children (Li and Curdt-Christiansen, 2024), thereby impacting how migrant children interact with their local peers who seem to be in a more advantaged living condition. Similarly, parenting styles also influence how children form and maintain friendships, with positive parent-child relationships often correlating with healthier peer

relationships (Arabaci and Demircioğlu, 2021). The collective orientation rooted in Confucianism further guides children's friend selection, with parents sometimes intervening to ensure children adhere to acceptable social norms in Chinese society (Woodman and Guo, 2017; Zhu, 2020a). Adults' influence, whether supportive or restrictive, shapes the quality and, sometimes, the nature of children's peer interactions when drawing on the theoretical construction emphasising the interdependence between children and adults regarding children's relational agency (Abebe, 2019).

Moreover, the existing literature on peer relationships in childhood tends to focus on Western contexts, where children's agency is often studied in environments with stable family structures (Chen et al., 2006; Corsaro and Eder, 1990). In contrast, the experiences of LBC in China provide a unique context for examining how children exercise agency in the reshaped family structures due to parental migration. By focusing on LBC, this study also broadens the geographical scope of research on children's agency, offering insights that are applicable not only to China but also to other contexts where children face similar challenges due to parental migration (Asis, 2006; Ba Nguyen and Van Nguyen, 2022; Reyes, 2007).

1.3 Conceptualisations

Relational agency emphasises that agency is not exercised in isolation, but rather within the context of social relationships (Esser, 2016; Roest et al., 2023; Üzümcü, 2023). Thus, this research is grounded in the conceptual framework addressing relational agency, which focuses on the ways in which children exercise agency in relation to others, particularly with peers (Choi, 2020; Qvortrup et al., 2005). Also, prior debates on children's agency in the sociology of childhood help formulate the concept of LBC's relational agency. For LBC, peer relationships are an important site for the exercise of agency, as these relationships provide opportunities for negotiation, collaboration, and the assertion of autonomy.

The concept of relational constraints is also central to the theoretical framework of this research. Relational constraints refer to power that limits children's ability to exercise agency and silences children's voices (Spyrou, 2016). Based on prior discussions on structural constraints of child agency and human agency (Valentine, 2011) while incorporating a relational approach, the relational

constraints imposed by others on LBC's relational agency is then conceptualised. Based on prior LBC studies and adults' positions in children's peer relationships, these constraints might come from both peers and adults when navigating LBC's reshaped interpersonal relationships after parental migration.

Another key concept is children's competence to negotiate social normativity while justifying themselves and their related social behaviours to be the new norms. Social norms play a significant role in shaping children's social interactions (Goodwin and Kyratzis, 2007). LBC, like other children, must have navigated these norms in their peer relationships. However, the absence of parents and the influence of surrogate parents (seen as grandparents and other relatives) often complicate this process for LBC when they interact with peers. When removing adults' impact, children themselves also negotiate their norms with each other. Thus, this research examines different ways that LBC negotiate social norms in their peer interactions in both family and school contexts, and how they justify their behaviours in relation to these norms.

Together, these 3 concepts, relational agency, relational constraints, and the negotiation of social norms and related justifications, form the basis of the conceptual framework for this research. By applying this framework to the study of LBC's peer relationships, the research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how LBC navigate their social environments and exercise agency in the face of various relational constraints with social norms involved.

1.4 Research questions

The research is guided by 3 core questions, each of which aims to address the 3 dimensions from the conceptual framework:

1. How do Chinese LBC enact relational agency in their peer interactions?
2. What are the relational constraints imposed by others, including peers and adults, in the context of Chinese LBC's agency in peer relationships?
3. How do Chinese LBC react to these constraints in their peer interactions?

The research aims to explore the ways in which LBC assert their voices when practising relational agency, navigate relational constraints imposed by others when socialising with peers, and negotiate social norms with peers.

1.5 Methodological approach

Given the focus of this study on children's agency in peer relationships, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate for addressing the research questions. Interview prompts were generated based on the conceptual framework. Data were collected from 16 LBC participants aged between 9 and 16 over a period from March 2022 to October 2023. The primary data collection method was through WeChat, a popular digital communication platform in China. Video calls, text messages, and audio messaging on WeChat were used to conduct interviews and collect data on participants' peer interactions. This approach allowed for ongoing and in-depth communication with participants, providing rich data on their experiences.

In addition to the interviews conducted on WeChat, supplementary data were collected through WeChat Moments posts and in-person interviews. The use of digital platforms for data collection is an innovative aspect of this research, as it allowed for greater flexibility in communication and provided access to participants in remote areas. However, it also presented certain challenges, such as the time-consuming nature of online communication compared to in-person interviews.

The data were analysed using a combination of narrative analysis, discourse analysis, and thematic analysis. Narrative analysis was used to explore the personal stories and experiences shared by participants, while discourse analysis focused on the ways in which participants constructed their agency and relationships through language. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes in the data, particularly in relation to the three research questions on relational agency, relational constraints, and normativity negotiation and justification.

Other than university-based ethics, this research also addresses cultural differences and the ethics in using digital platform when conducting research with children and youth in the methodology chapter (Chapter 4). Given the cross-cultural nature of this research, positionality has also been reflected upon accordingly in the chapter.

1.6 Significance of the research

Drawing on the conceptualisations of agency, the first research question focuses on how Chinese LBC enact relational agency in their peer interactions. This includes delving into their ability to actively participate in dealing inequality encountered in peer interactions, shift perspectives and differentiate between peer groups, create criteria for friend selection and rejection and the reasons of their silences. The second question addresses the constraints that LBC face in their peer relationships, which are highly relevant with social norms, such as birth order, gender roles, and adults' expectations. Finally, the third question explores how LBC negotiate social norms which are seen as relational constraints, and justify their social behaviours directly, subtlety and/or subversively within the context of peer relationships in adult-led institutional settings.

The key findings make several important contributions to the field of childhood studies and LBC studies. It challenges the dominant narratives in Chinese LBC research, which have traditionally focused on the vulnerabilities of LBC and the negative consequences of parental migration. By shifting the focus to children's agency, this research de-stereotypes LBC and positions them as active social agents who are capable of navigating complex social dynamics in both family and school settings.

This research contributes to the understanding of children's agency by employing a relational approach. Relational agency emphasises the role of social relationships in shaping children's actions and decisions, and this study demonstrates how LBC exercise agency within the context of their peer relationships. By focusing on relational agency, this research highlights the importance of peer relationships in children's socialisation and provides new insights into how LBC navigate the constraints imposed by both peers and adults.

This research broadens the geographical scope of research on children's agency by incorporating the Chinese context. While much of the existing literature on children's agency focuses on Western contexts, this study demonstrates the relevance of agency in the lives of LBC in China. By examining LBC's agency in both school and family settings, this research

contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of children's socialisation processes in non-Western contexts.

This research has practical implications for the facilitation of LBC's agency in China. By understanding the ways in which LBC navigate their peer relationships and exercise agency, adults can develop more effective support systems for these children. For example, interventions that focus on facilitating children's practice of agency in school and creating more inclusive social environments could help LBC develop stronger social networks and improve their overall social skills and well-being. Family and school should collaborate to facilitate children's practices of agency.

1.7 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is structured into 8 chapters:

Chapter 1 provides a brief introduction to the thesis.

Chapter 2 reviews the existing literature on LBC in China, and LBC from other countries, and children's peer relationships, providing detailed rationale and assumptions for conducting this research.

Chapter 3 elaborates on the theoretical framework of relational agency, relational constraints, and negotiation of social normativity and related justification by utilising related theories and concepts from both the sociology of childhood and sociology.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodology used, including a diagram of the connections between several important parts of the thesis showing the logic thread of the whole thesis, the justification of interview prompts based on theoretical framework, sampling and participants, data collection and analysis methods, ethics, positionality, as well as reflexivity demonstrating the challenges faced during the research process.

Chapter 5 presents the empirical findings on the different types of agency that LBC exhibit in their peer relationships.

Chapter 6 explores the different relational constraints imposed by others that LBC face in their interactions with peers.

Chapter 7 examines different ways of LBC's negotiation regarding social norms and the related justification of their social behaviours in the context of peer relationships.

Chapter 8 concludes the thesis by summarising the key findings, discussing the contributions, the dissemination of research results, and indexing future research directions based on the identification of research limitations.

In all, this research contributes to the understanding of children's agency in peer relationships by exemplifying Chinese LBC. By focusing on LBC as active social agents, this study expands the theoretical understanding of children's agency in non-Western contexts. The findings highlight the importance of peer relationships in the lives of LBC and provide valuable insights into how they navigate the relational constraints imposed by both peers and adults. Moreover, the research's new findings, along with its practical implications for fostering adult collaborations to support children's agency in China, underscores its significance in challenging and deconstructing stereotypes of LBC both in academic discourse and in broader society. By highlighting the active role of children in shaping their peer relationships, this research also contributes to a more nuanced understanding of LBC, moving beyond reductive views and fostering a more inclusive narrative. As this research demonstrates, LBC are not passive victims or recipients of their circumstances but active social agents who can navigate their social worlds with competence.

Chapter 2 Literature review

In this chapter, I will introduce Chinese LBC and explore the reasons behind their left behind status. I will also review literature on LBC in China and international literature in general about LBC. Assumptions regarding how parental migration might reshape Chinese LBC's interpersonal relationships will also be provided. A brief overview of previous studies on children's peer relationship, LBC's peer relationship and adults' impact and intervention on children's peer relationships will be presented to establish the rationale and assumptions for this research. The central argument of this review emphasises the importance of incorporating children's perspectives and voices when studying Chinese LBC's agency in peer relationships. These assumptions will be connected to the research questions and the three elements of the conceptual framework, which will be further detailed in the methodology chapter.

2.1 Understanding LBC and LBC phenomenon

2.1.1 Who are LBC in China?

In China, LBC are defined as children or young people under 16 or 18 (remain in dispute) who live separately from their migrant parent(s) but under the guardianship of other relatives, usually grandparents (Chang et al., 2019). The living conditions of migrant parents and their children are central to defining LBC and differentiating LBC from other children in China (Xiao, 2015b).

Children who live in rural areas with both parents or just one parent migrate to cities are named *nongcun liushou*² (Murphy, 2022). Those who live in urban areas and their parent(s) migrate(s) to other more developed urban areas are called *chengshi liushou*³ (Wang et al., 2020). Those who live in China and their parent(s) migrate(s) abroad to another country are categorised by Chinese scholars as *yang liushou*⁴ (Lu et al., 2016). This research does not focus on a specific type of LBC, but rather considers all of them as LBC.

Regardless of the different destinations of Chinese migrant workers, researchers tend to recognise LBC as children of migrant workers who usually spend less than three months each year with their biological parents (Ge et al.,

² In Chinese characters: 农村留守.

³ In Chinese characters: 城市留守.

⁴ In Chinese characters: 洋留守.

2019). Even though their age remains in dispute, researchers often regard LBC as children or young people under eighteen in families with migrant parents (Xiao, 2015a).

2.1.2 Reasons for being left behind

Several policies in China have caused the left-behind phenomenon. According to the Reform and Opening Up policy launched in 1978 (Zhang, 2018), surplus labour forces (understood as LBC's migrant parents) streamed to cities and supported China's urbanisation and economic growth. Younger and older ones in migrant workers' (Li, 2018; Luo and Zhi, 2019) families have been left behind in rural areas. After more than forty years of economic growth since 1978, as well as the support system built up for the construction of the new socialist countryside in all aspects (Looney, 2015), the rural areas have gradually become more prosperous than before. In addition, the remittances sent back by the migrant workers to the left behind ones have contributed to promoting prosperity in rural China. However, the household registration policy in China continues to restrict migrant workers and their children from living without any threshold in the hosting cities (Piracha et al., 2013).

In principle, migrant workers can apply for temporary residence permits which allow them to send their children to public schools (normally with a higher reputation than private ones in China) (Yang and Bansak, 2020), but the application requires sophisticated documents and high costs more than most of the migrants could provide or afford (Zhou et al., 2020). Thus, most of them either send their migrant children to private low-fee boarding schools or leave them behind to attend public schools located at their hometowns. Although some families can afford to send their children to local private schools, the education quality of the private ones is relatively poor compared to that of public schools in cities (Liang and Chen, 2007; Yang and Bansak, 2020). Meanwhile, the household registration system and absence of local connections still restrict migrant children's access to public compulsory education with good quality (Butrymowicz, 2012). Additional fees might apply regardless of certain local policies against such practices (Li et al., 2020). Public schools are also more affordable than private schools as the former is covered in the nine-year free compulsory education in China (CaixinMedia, 2014).

As most internal migrant parents could not afford to take their children to live in cities during migration (Xiao, 2015a), grandparents, relatives or just one biological parent (mostly a mother) usually take care of the LBC (Ge et al., 2019) after parental migration. Grandparents and other relatives are usually recognised as surrogate parents (Zheng et al., 2022). All of these adults involved in LBC's caretaking, including migrant parents who provide remote caretaking, are LBC's guardians (Gu, 2022). This is normally the arrangement of childrearing in a family with migrant workers and LBC (Ye et al., 2013). Other than money issues, migrant workers usually take full-time jobs with frequent overtimes or run small business in cities⁵ which require a lot of efforts to make more money than what they earn in rural areas (Luo et al., 2019). Thus, they do not have much time and energy left to do childcare. Surrogate parenting becomes very common in these families. However, it does not mean that they are all irresponsible parents (Wang, et al., 2017). This is because they plan to leave the children behind to earn more money and secure a better future for them, relying on other family members who choose not to migrate to care for the children at home (Meng and Yamauchi, 2015).

Although the issue of child-parent separation has eased to some extent, many families continue to face significant challenges, and a large number of children in China remain left behind. In 2016, there were around 9.02 million LBC in rural areas, which dropped to 6.97 million in 2018 (Xu et al., 2023). By the end of 2020, this figure had further decreased to 6.436 million (Xu et al., 2023). They attend rural public schools, with their migrant parents coming back from cities and visiting them regularly or irregularly.

How people view migration has an impact on their migration decision-making. The meaning that Chinese people impose on migration is complex (Davin, 1999; Miller, 2012). According to Davin (1999), poverty, a shortage of job opportunities, and low standards of living in rural areas are viewed as the push factors, which force migration. The living or working environment in the city, as well as personal desire for all the potential benefits, became the pull factors of migration (Davin, 1999). Researchers also suggested that migration has become a prevailing trend across generations, driven by a desire to follow societal norms or to put their skills into practice, rather than solely as a means

⁵ Full time jobs with frequent overtimes or small business running usually crowds out time for childcare, based on a highly competitive labour market in China (Lan, 2022).

of escaping poverty (Du et al., 2015; Zhou et al., 2020). Hence, migration can also be understood as both an act of following societal trends and a decision made under constrained circumstances. These debates resonate with the desires of Chinese migrant workers for improved economic opportunities and better education for their children (Hu, 2019), even some of them might not fully recognise the potential negative consequences of migration (Ye et al., 2013). For instance, the absence of quality in-person childcare is one consequence, as senior members in left behind families might not be able to provide adequate care (Zhou et al., 2021). LBC may perceive migration differently when the perspective shifts to focus on internal migration in China, incorporating children's perspectives and voices.

2.2 Dominant approaches in the literature on LBC in China: the shifting of research paradigms

2.2.1 Psychological approaches

In most LBC studies employing psychological approaches, LBC's emotional, cognitive, and behavioural situations after parental migration have been examined to understand the challenges they face (Zhang, 2016). However, these psychological approaches tend to emphasise how to improve LBC's communicative or social skills, often operating on the assumption that these issues stem from underlying psychological problems. These approaches often carry passive connotations, portraying LBC in China as passive recipients of parental migration. This perspective has further contributed to negative stereotypes, resulting in discrimination from their non-LBC peers, which has been shown to exacerbate existing behavioural problems among LBC (Fu et al., 2023). Even when self-resilience is framed as a coping strategy for addressing LBC's challenges, the term itself implies a sense of resistance to pre-determined or predicted disadvantages and symptoms.

Attachment theory is one of the most widely used conceptual frameworks in LBC studies (Zhang and Deng, 2022). Research suggests that LBC are more likely to develop insecure attachment patterns, such as anxious or avoidant attachment, compared to their non-LBC peers who live with their parents (Chen, 2022). Relevant findings also indicate that LBC are more likely to face difficulties in forming healthy relationships later in life, as they often experience higher levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness, compared to their

seemingly more advantaged non-LBC peers (Lin et al., 2024). Periodic visits of parents can temporarily alleviate some of LBC's emotional problems, but they can also worsen the situation when parents return to cities and leave their children again (Zhao, 2017). This pattern involves ups and downs in emotions with hope and disappointment attached can result in emotional instability, which further complicates LBC's ability to develop secure attachments (Chen, 2022). Thus, the psychological approaches framed by attachment theory emphasises the importance of consistent caregiving for the healthy emotional development of LBC (Zhang, 2016).

The above-mentioned attachment patterns were also found to be associated with Chinese LBC's emotional disorders, leading to more cognitive and behavioural problems due to parental migration (Fan et al., 2010). The emotional stress of living apart from parents can hinder children's cognitive development, affecting their memory, attention, and problem-solving abilities (Chen, 2023). Symptoms of cognitive overload often emerge, as the stress from LBC's personal lives, stemming from parental migration, distracts them from maintaining intense focus on school learning (He et al., 2022). Their academic performance in school often tends to be poor (Bai et al., 2018; Li et al., 2017). The cognitive impairment caused by stress can lead to learning difficulties and lower academic performance, perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage.

Researchers have also highlighted behavioural problems associated with parental migration. Some LBC are more likely to exhibit conduct issues, such as losing their temper, lying or stealing (Hu et al., 2014). They also tend to display signs of hyperactivity or inattention, such as being restless, overactive, and easily distracted (Hu et al., 2014). Furthermore, studies suggest that LBC often face struggles in peer relationship, including feelings of isolation, being bullied, difficulty forming peer connections, and displaying fewer prosocial behaviours (Hu et al., 2014; Wen and Lin, 2012).

Among the diagnostic paradigms in the psychology of Chinese LBC, coping strategies have also been explored, alongside an identification of their resilience against cyclical disadvantages. First, LBC themselves were found to seek peer support, engage in extracurricular activities, and demonstrate their resilience in mitigating stressful feelings and emotions (Cui et al., 2021). Beyond these self-reliant coping strategies, external intervention programs have been developed

to help Chinese LBC address these diagnosed issues. For instance, several studies have highlighted group psychological interventions that train LBC in areas such as psychological skills, building resilience, enhancing self-esteem, and managing emotions (Wang et al., 2020).

These interventions are often led by multidisciplinary research teams from universities. However, this approach means that children not selected for these research projects may continue to suffer from mental health issues due to the incomplete establishment of a comprehensive psychological support system for LBC in China (Hung, 2023). Other interventions, including physical activities such as jogging, ball games, and various sports, have also been found effective in improving LBC's mental health (Wang et al., 2020). These activities are typically organised and led by teachers from local schools, although school policies vary when addressing LBC's challenges.

As mentioned, psychological approaches in the literature often emphasise the vulnerabilities of LBC rather than their strengths, leaving their perspectives and voices largely underexplored. These studies tend to problematise Chinese LBC instead of recognising their agency or empowering them. As a result, aspects such as LBC's participation in decision-making processes or their capacity to exercise agency (Wyness, 2018) are frequently overlooked. For instance, LBC's involvement in decisions regarding parental migration and caregiving arrangements are rarely examined.

Incorporating children's perspectives and voices while emphasising their strengths instead of their vulnerabilities can help deconstruct stereotypes surrounding LBC. These limitations in psychological approaches prompted me to adopt theories of child agency from the sociology of childhood for this research. Moving beyond the dominant psychological paradigm, I will now turn to reviewing educational and sociological approaches in LBC studies.

2.2.2 Educational approaches

In recent years, an increasing number of studies have focused on the academic performance of Chinese LBC in schools (Yiu and Yun, 2017). Several factors contribute to this emphasis. The education of Chinese children is inherently a significant concern for both society and families (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). Education is also regarded as a vital pathway for upward social mobility in China, a value

deeply ingrained in Chinese culture (Bian, 2002). As a result, prioritising education is considered a social norm in Chinese society. Out of the primary motivations for migrant workers to move is to secure better educational opportunities for their children and accumulate funds for their education (Hu, 2019). Consequently, the academic performance of LBC has attracted significant attention from researchers, policymakers, and the broader society. At the same time, psychological studies have demonstrated that parental migration directly impacts children's cognitive development, which in turn affects their academic performance. Beyond the educational policies associated with residential policies in hosting cities, whether LBC's academic performance meets the expectations of their parents before their migration is an issue that warrants further attention.

However, within debates on educational approaches in studies on LBC in China, the voices of the children themselves are rarely heard. Much of the research remains results-oriented, focusing primarily on academic performance, whether through comparisons among LBC, between LBC and their non-LBC peers, or variations by gender, thereby only capturing a limited aspect of their abilities. For instance, a study suggests that LBC who perform well academically and meet their parents' expectations experience less distress compared to those with poor academic performance (Man and Cao, 2020). Higher academic achievement is linked to greater life satisfaction among LBC (Song et al., 2018), indicating that migrant parents' expectations regarding their children's academic performance correlate with children's mental well-being. In a comparative study on academic performance, LBC were found to perform below their non-LBC peers on average (Jin et al., 2020). Only a small number of LBC outperformed their non-LBC counterparts academically. Gender differences have also been observed in LBC's academic performance. For example, being left behind has been shown to significantly impact girls' academic achievement (Song et al., 2018). While male LBC initially demonstrate advantages in educational expectations during primary school, female LBC surpass their male peers in holding higher educational expectations by junior high school (Huang and Gong, 2022). Migrant and surrogate parents often differentiate their educational expectations and child-rearing practices based on the gender of LBC, which reflects underlying gender inequality (Huang and Gong, 2022).

Another strand within educational approaches focuses on the educational structures surrounding LBC, rather than solely on their academic performance. LBC have varying meanings across diverse social contexts, reflecting their different living situations. However, despite these differences, there are similarities in the quality of education they receive. As discussed in section 2.1, multiple barriers hinder Chinese LBC from accessing long-term, high-quality educational resources. In a narrow sense, the term ‘left-behind children’ in the context of Chinese school education resonates with the meaning of ‘left behind children’ in U.S classrooms, where the term often refers to underachieving or struggling students (Bradbury et al., 2015). Within the educational context, Chinese LBC can also be understood as a vulnerable and marginalised group who lack preferential access to quality educational and social resources (Deng, 2013; Yi et al., 2019). In this sense, being left behind is not solely about the familial rearrangement of child-rearing. Rather, it also extends to the potential educational and social resources available to LBC, such as their limited access to quality compulsory education in cities.

Migration has exposed migrant parents to diverse lifestyles, leading some to place less emphasis on their children’s education or academic performance (Xiao, 2015b). However, this perspective does not represent all migrant parents. Such a dichotomy highlights the differing attitudes among migrant parents towards LBC’s education and the varying educational norms or practices they adopt.

Meanwhile, in the domain of relationships, student-teacher relationships and peer relationships in school will be explored in detail in section 2.4.3 below. Additionally, section 2.5.2 will highlight why adults and child-adult relationships are remain significant in the context of children’s peer relationships, demonstrating the strong connection between the two.

2.2.3 Sociological approaches

Researchers suggest that sociological approaches represent a promising future direction for studying Chinese LBC (Ge et al., 2019). However, compared to the sociology of childhood, existing sociological approaches in within the field of LBC in China tend to focus more on macro and meso levels rather than the micro level. Consequently, children’s perspectives and voices remain underrepresented. Moreover, sociological approaches, often influenced by

psychological frameworks, continue to emphasise Chinese LBC's disadvantages and vulnerabilities, frequently problematising them and their daily lives with surrogate parents. These sociological approaches also largely frame them within structural and cultural constraints, as reflected in studies on policies, family dynamics and social norms. While such constraints are essential to discuss in the context of children's agency, they can also be approached more constructively by highlighting Chinese LBC's strengths. Viewing norms as social practices rather than static cultural elements raises questions about their relevance to the relational agency of Chinese LBC in peer relationships. By conceptualising norms as dynamic and practiced within social interactions, we can better understand how Chinese LBC navigate and potentially reshape these norms through their peer relationships and everyday actions. This perspective shifts the focus from seeing Chinese LBC as passive recipients of norms to recognising their active roles in engaging with and reshaping these norms.

The following paragraphs present evidence illustrating how this study problematises existing sociological approaches. Key focuses of the sociological approaches include: (1) the roles of grandparenting and parenting within family dynamics; (2) the financial and non-financial social capital of families; (3) social policies and their implementation, including institutional barriers; and (4) gender disparities.

Intergenerational relationships will be discussed in section 2.4 below. Despite the reshaped dynamics following parental migration, the roles of grandparenting and parenting remain significant in the sociology of Chinese LBC. Research indicates that while grandparents frequently take on the primary caregiving role for LBC, they often face challenges in providing adequate emotional and educational support due to generational differences and limited resources (Cong and Silverstein, 2014). The quality of these intergenerational relationships varies significantly. Some grandparents create nurturing and supportive environments, whereas others struggle to meet the physical and emotional demands of raising their grandchildren (Cong and Silverstein, 2014; Guo et al., 2009). Divergent perceptions between grandparents and grandchildren can also lead to communication barriers (Song et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2024). Studies further reveal that these kinship ties and caregiving arrangements can contribute to LBC's mental health challenges (Guo et al.,

2009; Li et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2024). Additionally, insufficient childcare by grandparents has sometimes resulted safety issues for LBC (Abbasi et al., 2017; Wen et al., 2020). Countermeasures to protect LBC's safety will be discussed in section 2.4 below, which examines their reshaped interpersonal relationships in light of current living conditions.

Remittances are a common financial resource for families with migrant workers, as obtaining more money is often the primary goal of migration. Studies frequently examine the contribution of remittances from migrant parents to household income and how these funds are allocated for LBC's education, healthcare, and daily needs (Pan and Dong, 2020; Tang, 2017). Research often evaluates whether this financial support can offset the negative impact of parental absence. Xiao (2015) found that as LBC continue to receive remittances as a substitute for parental care, they often express ambivalence when asked to choose between having their material needs fulfilled and having their parents present but less financial support. Migration has evidently altered LBC's perceptions of the childcare provided by their migrant parents, which they have long desired. Some studies also suggest that remittances improve educational opportunities by enabling families to afford tuition, school supplies, and after-school tutoring (Agasty, 2016; Hu, 2018). However, other research indicates that the absence of parental involvement may diminish or negate the positive effects of remittances on education (Hu, 2012).

Non-financial social capital within families includes social networks, which differ from the relationships reshaped and formed after parental migration. In China, social networks and social norms are deeply ingrained in the culture and play a significant role in shaping societal interactions (Fei, 1992). These networks often enable families to accumulate social capital for improved living conditions. Sociological research indicates that strong community support networks can mitigate some of the adverse effects of parental absence on LBC (Li, 2021). In certain rural areas, extended family members, neighbours, and local organisations play crucial roles in providing care and support to LBC (Li, 2021). However, the presence and effectiveness of these support networks vary widely depending on the socio-economic conditions and cultural norms of the community (Li, 2021).

In addition to the LBC-related social policies and services discussed in section 2.4, this section addresses them from a different perspective, as they constitute another dominant trend in the sociology of Chinese LBC. These studies often focus on institutional barriers faced by both Chinese LBC and their migrant parents. Notably, those social policies were mentioned in section 2.1 in relation to the reasons for being left behind. Further relevant policies will also be identified in section 2.5, which emphasises LBC's reshaped interpersonal relationships after parental migration.

Sociologists also highlighted the shortcomings of efforts aimed at improving the welfare of Chinese LBC (Ge et al., 2019; Hung et al., 2023b). For example, while initiatives such as offering educational subsidies and upgrading rural school infrastructure have been implemented, challenges like inadequate policy implementation, weak enforcement, and significant regional disparities in the effectiveness remain major barriers to fully addressing LBC's needs (Wang et al., 2016). In addition to educational resources, access to better social services and benefits is also tied to the household registration system. This system often results in rural LBC receiving fewer social welfare benefits compared to their urban counterparts (Deng, 2020). Remittances, meanwhile, appear to function as a form of informal insurance for families with LBC. However, this reliance on family-provided introduces significant instability, as the income of migrant workers is often unpredictable and unstable (Swider, 2015).

Social welfare organisations and local communities have provided public resources to support LBC and their families. Numerous social donations have been made to assist LBC financially (Hu et al., 2022). However, studies on Chinese LBC suggest that LBC may require more mental health support than financial assistance, as mental health issues are a prevalent concern (Adhikari et al., 2014; Jiang, et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2018). Migrant parents typically provide financial support to the surrogate caregivers and LBC who remain at home, making direct financial aid from society seem less impactful. In fact, research indicates that such donations may even harm LBC's self-esteem (Hu et al., 2022). There are, however, various forms of mental health support available to LBC. Social workers regularly visit LBC and their surrogate parents to offer assistance (Ye, 2021). Some surrogate mothers, unrelated by blood to the LBC they care for, have registered with welfare organisations to take turns

providing care for other's LBC (Li, 2016). Volunteers have launched initiatives such as the Blue Letter Project, which facilitates hand-written letters exchanges between university students and LBC (Li, 2019). Volunteer teachers from cities also serve as accessible resources for LBC in need of help (Miao, 2018). Additionally, schools provide LBC with access to free phones or computers to stay in touch with their migrant parents (Lam et al., 2013).

Among the various forms of support provided by adults, LBC's peers have been found to offer assistance in ways that adults cannot (Li et al., 2022; Ling et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2022; Zhang and Deng, 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). Peer support is often seen as an informal form of social assistance compared to the formal support provided by officially recognised welfare organisations and services. However, sociological approaches that address LBC's interactions with peers remain relatively underexplored compared to these peers-related psychological approaches in LBC studies. Existing research primarily views LBC's peers as mediators of their mental health issues, such as alleviating loneliness (Bi et al., 2020). I argue, however, that peer support can act as a double-edged sword for LBC. While peers can provide valuable support, the mediating role of peers often overlooks peer confrontations and their negative effects. Furthermore, the literature on LBC in China rarely examine how they navigate and manage their peer relationships. Both peer support and the multiple social welfare services provided by adults are indispensable mechanisms for supporting LBC. However, these approaches often problematise LBC and differentiate them from other children, framing them primarily through a deficit lens.

Gender disparities are not limited to the sociological approaches discussed above. In the educational approaches addressed in section 2.2.2, the connection between LBC's gender and their education has been explored. Gender-related issues will also be examined in section 2.3 and section 2.5. Despite these gender-related topics being scattered across different sections, gender is addressed here as a crucial part of sociological approaches.

In addition to the variation by gender in LBC's academic performance as discussed earlier in this chapter, especially in section 2.2.2 on page 17, gender continues to be a significant factor shaping LBC's living conditions. Research shows that migrant parents are disproportionately more likely to leave behind

middle school-aged daughters rather than sons in impoverished rural areas, particularly at the point when education becomes more costly and access more limited (Gao et al., 2023). This tendency is even more pronounced when the daughter has a male sibling. Moreover, daughters receive significantly fewer remittances from migrant parents compared to sons, highlighting a gendered disparity in both caregiving and financial support (Gao et al., 2023). Traditional gender roles are often imposed on Chinese LBC, with female children expected to take on more household responsibilities, especially in the absence of parents (Ye and Pan, 2011). These burdens are heavier for girls, who also face stricter expectations and are often criticised for voicing discomfort (Ye and Pan, 2011). While boys take on some tasks, girls disproportionately handle physically demanding work (Ye and Pan, 2011). Within the limited debates on gender disparities reflected in Chinese LBCs' voices, another study found that boys were more likely to highlight material support from grandparents while girls emphasised emotional bonds and the transmission of cultural traditions (Wang et al., 2024). These differences reflect broader gender norms in how children perceive and express intergenerational care. Beyond these gendered divisions, this study argues that kinship norms and Chinese filial piety further shape how LBC experience peer relationships within the home.

Overall, the three major existing approaches to studying LBC in China rarely address migration from the children's perspective. Emphasising how LBC experience daily life and incorporating their voices in the context of parental migration is crucial for developing a more comprehensive understanding of their agency and everyday experiences.

2.3 International literature in general about LBC: a comparative perspective

The phenomenon of being left behind is not unique to China, as relevant studies have developed a certain understanding of LBC in other countries. The following sections focus on different topics, highlighting the strong resemblance between approaches utilised in international literature on LBC and those found in the literature on LBC in China. Another focus of the discussions is the similarities and differences between the literature on LBC in China and international literature, as adopting a comparative perspective can enrich the understanding of LBC in the Chinese context. Different perspectives from the

international literature also inform the rationale and assumptions underlying this research. Furthermore, one of the potential contributions of this thesis lies in advancing the international literature on LBC.

2.3.1 Family relationship

Family relationships are a major focus in LBC studies due to the rearrangement of childrearing caused by parental migration. For instance, a study on the effects of Ghanaian parents' migration found that living in transnationally family arrangements does not necessarily delay children's development, provided that childrearing arrangements remain stable (Cebotari et al., 2018). Factors such as steady marital bonds and consistent childcare were identified as crucial for fostering positive development in these transnational families (Cebotari et al., 2018). These findings align with several studies focusing on LBC in China, which emphasises the resilience that LBC develop after parental migration, suggesting that delayed development is not always a given. However, the phenomenon of being left behind cannot simply be understood as having no negative impact on children.

A study comparing LBC and non-LBC in the Philippines found that LBC tend to experience greater emotional loneliness and stress, particularly when their mothers migrate (Smeekens et al., 2012). Additionally, without a mother's presence, LBC are more likely to face physical health issues compared to their non-LBC peers (Smeekens et al., 2012). These findings align with studies on LBC in China that adopt psychological approaches, but they tend to place greater emphasis on the gender of migrant parents and their impact on LBC, rather than the gender of the LBC themselves and how this interacts with parental migration. Filipino migrants often use transnational communication methods to maintain long-distance intimacy with their children left at home (Parreñas, 2005). Research also suggests that sustaining intimacy between migrant mothers and their LBC is particularly challenging (Parreñas, 2005). Social inequality in the Philippines often compels more women to migrate, yet their children tend to seek love, guidance, and security from their mothers (Parreñas, 2005). This highlights how family relations are shaped by social factors, such as gender inequality, which typically significantly affects the mother-child relationship in the context of migration or human mobility. Children in Estonia with migrant parents tend to experience negative emotions stemming

from a sense of separation (Kutsar and Darmody, 2014). This separation often forces them to mature more quickly than their peers, while also granting them more freedom and decision-making autonomy (Kutsar and Darmody, 2014). The autonomy and freedom experienced by Estonia LBC demonstrate their agency in family life after parental migration, offering a contrasting perspective to the more vulnerability-focused narratives commonly seen in LBC studies.

2.3.2 Remittances

Other than family relationships, the use of remittances is another prominent topic in the international literature on LBC. Research suggests that increased remittances sent to Cameroonian LBC cannot fully compensate for the temporary separation of family (Kuépié, 2018). In Egypt, studies show that a rise in remittances correlates with higher school enrolment rates among LBC, improved family stability, and a greater likelihood of both parents migrating (Koska et al., 2013). However, some research indicates that the benefits of migration do not always lead to continued schooling among left-behind boys and girls, with boys often being granted more rights to stay in school than girls (Yabiku and Agadjanian, 2017). Remittances sent by migrant parents also alleviate financial stress, reduce the likelihood of unemployment with the family, and contribute to national economic growth, as seen in Albania (Mendola and Carletto, 2012). They have been found to increase leisure time for left-behind family members, improve its quality, and motivate families to enhance market production (Glytsos, 2008). Gender issues are closely tied to both the use of remittances within left-behind families and the ability of migrant mothers to earn and send remittances. Families with migrant mothers tend to receive remittances more regularly, whereas families with migrant fathers benefit less consistently (Abrego, 2009). Gender inequality also emerges at the very beginning of the migration decision-making process within families. These gender-related findings in the international literature on LBC parallel those found in research on LBC in China, particularly regarding the gender inequalities and discrimination faced by female Chinese LBC, who are often subjected to traditional norms and expectations.

Not only does gender inequality emerge, but inequality between children and adults in these families is also apparent. From my perspective, the migration decision itself represents an unequal choice imposed by parents on children,

not to mention the potential uneven distribution of the benefits from received remittances. While migration may bring integral benefits to families, these often come at the sacrifice of the left-behind households. Even though I have questioned the negative connotations often associated with LBC in related studies, focusing excessively on a holistic view of how families are faring risks overlooking children's perspectives. Children may tend to situate themselves within other viewpoints and adapt themselves to parental migration rather than challenging the migration decision and child-rearing arrangements.

When reviewing these studies through a comparative lens and incorporating children's perspective, more nuanced issues come to light. For example, remittance is also a significant topic among Chinese LBC and their peers (Xiao, 2015b). Differing attitudes of LBC's parents or guardians toward money and consumption often trigger material comparison among LBC and their peers (Xiao, 2015b). These findings prompted me to raise questions about Chinese children's agency in navigating peer comparison, and other forms of competitions among LBC and their peers. Peer comparison, as a form of peer interaction, merits attention in LBC studies. Emphasising how LBC perceive and manage this type of peer interaction provides insights into their relational agency within peer relationships.

2.3.3 Education

The pursuit of opportunities for LBC to access better education has gained significant attention in the international literature on LBC. Education generally holds a crucial role in children's development. However, it appears to receive less emphasis compared to other household expenditures within this field. For instance, migration has altered Senegalese young men's attitudes toward their investing in children's education (Newman, 2019). Instead of funding conventional secondary education, they tend to prefer trade-related courses that prepare children for future migration (Auriol and Demonsant, 2012; Newman, 2019). This differs from narratives found in the literature on LBC in China, where migrant parents are often portrayed as prioritising traditional academic education and migrating specially to secure better educational opportunities for their children. That why much of the research in China focuses on the outcomes of LBC's academic performance in school. These differences

suggest that migrant parents' expectations for LBC's education vary significantly depending on the social and cultural context.

The gendered discrepancies in family educational decision-making are evident in studies from Cameroon and Senegal (Kuépié, 2018; Newman, 2019). In Cameroon, boys' school attendance is strongly influenced by factors such as the amount of remittances received, the age of the migrants, and the level of supervision provided by parents (Kuépié, 2018). Interestingly, while girls exhibit higher school attendance rates compared to boys under these conditions, this does not necessarily imply that migration positively impacts children's education in Cameroon (Kuépié, 2018). In Georgia, fathers' migration is linked to a decline in the quality of education received by LBC (Cebotari et al., 2016). Conversely, in Moldova, children tend to achieve better academic performance when migrant parents send higher remittances, regardless of family structure (Salah, 2008; Cebotari et al., 2016). Although increased financial resources appear to enhance educational opportunities, as shown in the Moldovan case, the Cameroonian findings suggest that education is not solely determined by a family's financial situation. In Sri Lanka, parental migration shows no significant effect on educational spending for LBC (Sarma and Parinduri, 2016). However, childcare arrangements play a notable role, as LBC with left-behind mothers tend to perform better academically than those with left-behind fathers (Sarma and Parinduri, 2016).

In China, schooling is regarded as orthodox education, distinct from education provided by families (Francis et al., 2010). Chinese parents traditionally place great emphasis on orthodox education, as a man of learning has long been respected in Chinese society (Li, 2001). The cultural and social inclination to revere knowledge has deeply ingrained overtime, forming societal norms (Lee, 1996). Schooling is widely trusted as an essential part of Chinese children's development. Migrant parents, in particular, view education as a transformative force capable of improving one's life and liberating individuals from the hard manual labour often associated with migration (Chang, Jiang, et al., 2019; Hu, 2019). Recent educational policies have mandated that attending low-fee private boarding schools or boarding facilities in public schools can enhance care and reduce safety risks for LBC during the compulsory education stage following parental migration (Caixin, 2014). Migrant parents commonly choose

between private low-fee boarding schools or boarding arrangements in public schools (Zhao, 2011). This trend brings peers into closer proximity to LBC. However, Chinese migrant parents may overlook the significant influence school peers have on their children (Liu et al., 2017). Given the cultural emphasis on education, Chinese parents tend to focus on the knowledge their children can gain from schoolteachers or academically stronger peers (Cheung and Pomerantz, 2011), often neglecting other factors that may shape their children's overall schooling experience.

As mentioned above, the education of LBC is a primary motivation for Chinese parents' migration (Hu, 2019). However, media reports indicate that high dropout rates among LBC during their second year of junior middle school are becoming increasingly common (Caixin, 2014). The main reason for this trend is that when LBC or their parents perceive that they lack the academic ability to pursue a university degree, they often decide to discontinue investing in formal or orthodox education. Instead, LBC are sent to vocational high school to acquire skills for blue-collar jobs, a trend known as the Grade Eight Phenomenon (Caixin, 2014). Beyond family influence, a study suggests that LBC's decisions to drop out also depend on peer opinion and behaviours (Zhao et al., 2013).

Parental migration introduces significant uncertainty into LBCs' daily lives, which cannot simply be categorised as wholly negative or positive. Migration, as a multifaceted phenomenon, brings with it a variety of research topics, including those related to LBC. Family-related topics and the impact of parental migration have dominated the international literature on LBC. However, peer relationships receive relatively little attention in the international literature compared to the more extensive focus found in studies on LBC in China. Furthermore, children's perspectives remain underrepresented in the international literature. I argue that peer relationships play a crucial role when parental care is insufficient or absent, although these interactions can also contribute to the uncertainty in LBC's lives.

2.4 Chinese LBC's reshaped interpersonal relationships in family and school settings after parental migration

Based on the current living conditions of Chinese LBC's, this section explores how their interpersonal relationships are reshaped within family and school

settings, where they spend most of their time. These relationships are also linked to relevant policies, which will be addressed to support my emphasis on peer relationships. Discussions on Chinese LBC's peer relationships have already appeared earlier in this chapter. These discussions demonstrate the necessity of this research, as peers play a crucial role in LBCs' lives after parental migration. Furthermore, I argue that, within family and school settings, Chinese LBC's peer relationships are strongly influenced by adults. This highlights the importance of considering their interpersonal relationships with adults when focusing on peer relationships. Adults' interventions and impact on children's peer relationships will be addressed in section 2.5.3 below. This section (section 2.4) only explores the structural aspects derived from prior studies on LBC in China.

2.4.1 Reshaped family structure and peer relationships in family setting after parental migration

Family is the primary living space for children. The experience of being left behind often begins with a decision made by senior family members. Researchers suggest that the decision to migrate, leaving children behind, is often based on families' assessment of the social resources available to them (Lam et al., 2013). These resources can help offset the negative effects of parental migration on children (Lam et al., 2013). Three key resources that families rely on to compensate for the challenges faced by LBC include: 1) sufficient care support within the immediate or extended family, 2) accessible communication tools that enable family members living apart to maintain relationships online, and 3) stable financial conditions to ensure the family's financial well-being (Lam et al., 2013).

Chinese LBC often live within such family arrangements, shaped by the resources available to their families. Frequently, Chinese LBC have limited input in the migration decision-making process. *Tinghua*⁶ becomes a criterion for migrant parents to judge whether their children are acting appropriately, without much reflection on the negative effects their migration may have on LBC (Hu, 2019). In extended families, grandparents often care for multiple grandchildren, particularly since the one-child was lifted since 2016 (López and Veiga, 2020).

⁶ It means being obedient to seniors in family. In Chinese characters: 听话. In Mandarin *pinyin*: *tinghua*. It is also seen as a Chinese family norm (Chen, 2014).

Even when migration decisions are made after careful consideration of accessible resources, debates remain regarding the benefits and drawbacks of parental migration (Zhong et al., 2020; Chen, 2023). When LBC live with their peers from their extended families, their perceptions of parental migration can be complex. For instance, competition to be seen as *tinghua* among LBC within the same household can be harmful, particularly when well-behaved children feel neglected by senior caregivers. Other than being *tinghua*, family norms acknowledged and practiced by surrogate parents may differ from those of the LBC's original family. These new norms can play a significant role as LBC adapt to living within a reshaped family structure alongside other peers.

Unstable marriages can also be linked to migration (Li, 2018). Some Chinese LBC have been found to live in divorced or remarried families (Wang et al., 2021), further complicating their living conditions and peer interactions within these family structures after parental migration. Living with stepsiblings while being separated from their biological parents has reshaped LBC's interpersonal relationships within the family setting, potentially influencing their peer interactions. In addition to the effects of parental migration and divorce, the above-mentioned norms may also impact LBC's peer relationships within the family.

In summary, the reshaped child-adult interpersonal relationships influencing LBC's peer relationships within the family include: 1) child-parent relationships; 2) grandchild-grandparent relationships; 3) child-adult relationships in remarried families. Additionally, the following types of peer relationships in family settings have been identified in this review: 1) LBC's relationships with siblings in immediate families; 2) LBC's relationships with maternal and paternal cousins; and 3) LBC's relationship with stepsiblings in remarried families.

2.4.2 Reshaped peer relationships in school due to longer school hours for Chinese LBC

The boarding arrangements in public schools have been implemented by the government to mitigate safety issues that occur outside of school (Zhao et al., 2011), such as accidental injuries, child abuse and neglect, bullying (Chen et al., 2020), sexual abuse (Wang et al., 2020) and child trafficking (Mu et al., 2021). As a result, LBC spend more time in school than at home after parental migration. Prior to the introduction of boarding arrangements in public schools,

Chinese children typically attend school for 9.5 hours to 14 hours per school day, depending on their educational stages (Kan, 2019). High schoolers, in particular, often attend extra classes on Saturdays (Wu, 2012). With boarding arrangements, children now interact with peers and teachers even more frequently. On weekends, boarders return home to stay with surrogate parents or other guardians. The boarding arrangements in Chinese rural public schools serve a similar purpose to low-fee private boarding school in cities, functioning not only as educational institutions but also childcare facilities. Some researchers argue that boarding arrangements or boarding schools are more of an isolation measure than a solution for LBC (Liu and Villa, 2020). However, other studies emphasised the benefits of group living, which has been shown to successfully reduce mental health problems as children feel happier and more fulfilled spending extracurricular time with peers in school (Zhao et al., 2013; Liu and Villa, 2020). Peer relationships also help left behind who are non-boarders mediate loneliness (Ling et al., 2017) and adapt to social life in school (Zhang and Deng, 2022) after parental migration. These peers-related findings among boarders and non-boarders align section 2.2.3, which address the role of peers in improving LBC's social and mental well-being. Beyond boarding conditions, some LBC are also required to take part in after-school programs to address safety concerns, as regional policies vary. While peers are often viewed as supporters, I emphasise the influence of policies that shape or reshape LBC's peer relationships in school. For instance, some LBC have been reported as victims of peer bullying in school (Chen et al., 2020).

2.4.3 Reshaped student-teacher relationships in school and its potential impact on LBC's peer relationships in school

As mentioned in section 2.2.3, volunteer teachers are considered a form of social support for LBC in China. This has prompted me to incorporate student-teacher relationship into my research to explore its potential impact on LBC's peer relationships in the school setting. The extended time LBC spend at school further underscores the importance of the student-teacher relationship as an important factor influencing LBC's peer interactions. In prior literature on LBC in China, the teacher-student relationship has been a prominent topic, often discussed alongside LBC's school performance. Teachers have been identified as a protective factor for LBC's emotional and behavioural adjustment (Liu et

al., 2015), with LBC being more receptive to the positive effects of strong teacher-student relationship (Liu et al., 2015). Furthermore, the quality of this relationship is linked to LBC's levels of depression (Guo et al., 2015). A negative student-teacher relationship has been found to strongly correlate with depression among migrant children, although this correlation is less significant for LBC (Guo et al., 2015). The student-teacher relationship also influences LBC's cognitive abilities (Ye and Wang, 2024). For instance, teacher support and student learning attitudes were identified as mediating factors that enhance the cognitive abilities of LBC (Ye and Wang, 2024). Another study on rural teacher's professional development highlights the challenges teachers face in building positive relationships with rural LBC, often due to the children's psychological or behavioural issues, lack of parental support, and inadequate school practices (Liu et al., 2024). These challenges, however, prompt rural teachers to become reflective practitioners, ultimately advancing their professional development, (Liu et al., 2024). Criticising these teachers' practices is not an end in itself.

Overall, both negative and positive aspects of LBC's relationships with teachers have been identified in existing research. School serves as a social setting where students' and teachers' social networks intersect, yet the impact of the LBC-teacher relationship on LBC's peer relationships in school has largely been overlooked.

Considering Chinese rituals in the classroom, as well as norms related to teachers' authority, power, and ground rules, it is essential to examine the student-teacher relationship when researching LBC's peer interactions. Instead of focusing solely on the role of teachers in supporting LBC, this research emphasises relational agency by exploring how LBC perceive and navigate the correlation between their peer relationships and their relationships with teachers in the school setting.

2.5 A brief review of prior research in children's peer relationships and adults' intervention and impact on them

Peer relationships have both positive and negative effects on children, making them a key focus of research throughout childhood and adolescence. A study by Peter and Craig (1992) reviews four main methods used to assess peer relationships in prior research, highlighting four major approaches: (1) children's

self-reports on their peer relations and friendships; (2) children's perceptions of their peers; (3) adult assessments (from both parents and teachers) of children's peer relationship skills; and (4) direct observations of children's interactions with peers. The study evaluates the strengths, weaknesses, and suitability of each method across different developmental stages of children, suggesting that a combination of perspectives provides the most comprehensive understanding of children's social well-being and offers directions for supporting positive peer relationships (Pepler and Craig, 1998).

While combining perspectives seems helpful in understanding LBC's peer interactions after parental migration, children's self-reports or perceptions of adults' impact on their peer relationships remain inadequately addressed within these synthesised approaches. Adults are generally viewed as influential or even dominant figures in children's lives. Additionally, children's interpersonal relationships can be understood as a network system, where different relationships intersect. This research aims to discuss studies related to children's peer relationships and elucidate the role of adults' intervention and impact, particularly when examined from children's perspectives.

2.5.1 Children's peer relationship

Children's peer relationship has long been a focus of research across various academic disciplines. In sociological approaches to children's peer relationships, Corsaro's (2005) defined children's peers as a group of people with whom children socialise on a regular basis and those who possess the agency to act collectively with children for a certain purpose. Also, Corsaro and Eder (1990) emphasise that children's peer cultures are autonomous and creative social systems where children actively participate and contribute. Rather than merely imitating adults, children creatively appropriate and transform elements from the adult world to address the specific needs and concerns of their peer world (Corsaro and Eder, 1990). They also highlight the role of peer cultures in children's socialisation process, arguing that these cultures play a crucial role in helping children navigate and eventually integrate into adult society (Corsaro and Eder, 1990). Building on these arguments, I posit that Chinese LBC can also be understood as active social agents within their peer relationships. The cultural norms that they share, recognise, and practice are valuable research subjects, as these norms may reflect not only

those shaped by children themselves but also those rooted in the adult world. As discussed in previous sections, Chinese social and cultural norms frequently surface in analyses, illustrating both children's practices of these existing norms and the potential influence of Chinese adult social norms on children's peer interactions and relationships.

In a book written by Chen and others on peer relationships and their cultural context emphasises the significant role cultural factors play in the development and dynamics of children's peer relationships. It highlights how cultural values, social norms, and community practices influence children's interactions, friendship formation, and navigation of social hierarchies (Chen et al., 2006). The authors argue that cultural differences significantly affect children's perceptions and engagement in peer relationships, with various cultures emphasising different aspects of social competence, conflict resolution, and the role of peer groups in socialisation (Chen et al., 2006). These insights offer valuable implications for educational practices and interventions aimed at fostering positive peer relationships in diverse cultural settings, showcasing the translational impact of such research (Chen et al., 2006). In another book, Chen and others (2009) also discuss cultural values of responsibilities in children's socialisation through peer relationships, identifying them as distal correlates of peer interactions. Both provide a strong rationale for researching LBC's peer relationships within the Chinese cultural context.

Another study reviews several psychological approaches addressing children's social competence in peer relationships, defining it as the behaviours and skills that enable children to establish and maintain positive interactions with peers (Ladd, 1999). The study highlights that peer acceptance plays a crucial role in social competence, with the degree to which a child is liked by their peers being a key determinant (Ladd, 1999). Children who experience peer rejection are more likely to face social and emotional challenges, including loneliness, anxiety, and depression (Ladd, 1999). These emotions-related themes contribute to dominate peer relationship studies rooted in psychological approaches (Moreira et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023). In contrast, incorporating sociological perspectives allows for a broader understanding of children's social competence. Societal factors such as gender inequality, social and cultural norms, societal structures, and parents' networks (Cochran and Davila, 2016),

are identified as significant influences on children's peer relationship. These factors are also recognised in this research as important components of children's relational agency, offering a more contextually embedded interpretation of social competence.

When comparing sociological and psychological approaches, the latter tends to examine peer relationships more extensively. While both approaches consider peer relationships from children's perspective, psychological approaches focus primarily on children's individual social well-being and the external factors influencing peer relationships. These approaches often propose intervention strategies aimed at improving peer relationships, typically framed within a context of addressing pre-identified problems in children's social behaviours (Pollak et al., 2023). However, children's peer relationships should be recognised as a social phenomenon that exists for specific reasons, similar to the phenomenon of being left behind in China, rather than being stigmatised as problematic behaviours. In addition, how children understand society through their peer relationships and their active participation in it remains inadequately addressed in prior studies utilising sociological approaches to children's peer relationships.

2.5.2 Chinese children's peer relationships

In fact, LBC's peer relationships in the literature on LBC in China are also discussed in sections 2.2.1, 2.2.3 and 2.4.2 above. Peers are typically regarded by researchers as mediators of LBC's mental health challenges or social loneliness caused by parental migration. For instance, studies indicate that peer groups are becoming increasingly important in the lives of LBC as the influence of parental migration diminishes (Ye and Pan, 2011). While peer interactions often provide support, they can also contribute to aberrant behaviours among LBC (Ye and Pan, 2011). In most literature on LBC in China where peer relationships are discussed, data on non-LBC peers are often utilised to compare school performance, including but not limited to academic outcomes. The advantages LBC might gain from parental migration are frequently assessed by comparing them with their non-LBC peers (Ye and Pan, 2011), aiming to evaluate the overall impact of parental migration on LBC's current living conditions. However, in these studies, peers and peer relationships often serve as a tool to measure the positive or negative outcomes of parental

migration, rather than focusing on LBC's ability to manage their peer relationships from their own perspectives. The prevailing trend in the literature on LBC in China continues to problematise LBC, even when peer relationships are included as a research focus.

When examining Chinese LBC's experiences in boarding schools in rural China, a study suggests that child boarders value interactions with their peers more than interactions with the school itself as peer interactions provide a means to avoid boredom and create moments of enjoyment in the school environment (Zhou, 2024). It was observed that these interactions often involve breaches of school rules, which the boarders perceived as common and normal, reflecting their disillusionment with school learning (Zhou, 2024). The study concluded that these children, left behind by migrant parents, did not have their emotions and feelings entirely shaped or controlled by the school environment (Zhou, 2024). Instead, their emotions were influenced by the shared meanings and experiences created through their peer interactions (Zhou, 2024). This research also sheds light on how peer relationships shape LBC's daily lives in school after parental migration, offering valuable insights into LBC's perspectives on peer relationships within the school setting.

Meanwhile, compared to the school setting, LBC's peer relationships within the family setting—shaping family dynamics and influencing LBC's daily lives after parental migration—appear to be inadequately addressed in prior studies on LBC in China. Existing research has primarily focused on child-parent relationships, with insufficient attention given to LBC's relationships with surrogate caregivers. I argue that the various types of child-adult relationships within the family setting are closely linked to LBC's peer relationships in this context. These above-mentioned underexplored areas in the literature on LBC in China, particularly in relation to their peer relationships, represent significant knowledge gaps in the field.

Several studies have explored the impact of peer relationships on the lives of Chinese children. One study suggests that peer victimisation tends to act more as a precursor, rather than a consequence, to lower academic achievement among Chinese children (Liu et al., 2014). Another study on school bullying highlights those strong social relationships with classmates help mitigate the negative effects of bullying (Xiao et al., 2021). Drawing on sociological

approaches to research peer relationships, a study explores how cultural factors shape the peer interactions of Chinese boys, (Chen et al., 2004), emphasising the influence of values such as collectivism, respect for authority, and academic focus (Chen et al., 2004). This aligns with another study suggesting that the development of Chinese children's self-concept is significantly influenced by the sociocultural environments in which they are raised (Wang and Li, 2003). These environments, rooted in centuries of philosophical beliefs, shape children's self-concepts through daily interactions with parents and peers (Wang and Li, 2003). All the above studies underscore the important roles peers play in shaping Chinese childhoods, while also shedding light on the influence of Chinese social norms on peer relationships.

Another study examines Chinese rural migrant children's perspectives using theories of hidden curriculum. In China, migrant children are those who move with their parents to live in cities. Through their viewpoints, unspoken social rules or norms in school become evident, even though living with their parents may temporarily mitigate the effects of being left behind (Li and Curdt-Christiansen, 2024). For example, rural migrant children are often portrayed as 'out of control' (Goodburn, 2009, p.497), 'not disciplined' (Goodburn, 2009, p.498), 'dirty' (Goodburn, 2009, p.498) and 'ignorant' (Goodburn, 2009, p.498). Their distinct accents, clothing, and behaviour make them stand out from their urban peers, further highlighting the gap between them and their urban counterparts (Li and Curdt-Christiansen, 2024). The household registration system reinforces the systematic exclusion in hosting cities, subtly imposing values that label them as 'outsiders' and pressuring them to conform to urban norms in speech and behaviour (Li and Curdt-Christiansen, 2024). This study emphasises that parental migration not only reshapes the peer relationships of LBC but also those of migrant children.

2.5.3 Adults' intervention and impact on children's peer relationships

Teachers in hosting cities for Chinese migrant children have been found to impose Mandarin and frequently correct their accents, revealing an implicit hierarchy within learning and student-teacher relationships (Dong, 2018). The rural dialects spoken by these migrant children symbolise their lower social status in classrooms (Li and Curdt-Christiansen, 2024), further reflecting child-adult power dynamics in school. Teachers subtly convey implicit values through

the exercise of their authority over children (Zhang and Luo, 2016), reinforcing social hierarchies in school. For instance, they have been observed overlooking local students' misbehaviour while appointing them as class representatives in front of migrant students (Li and Curdt-Christiansen, 2024). These differentiated treatments are embedded within the unspoken norms and values of Chinese socio-cultural contexts, further marginalising rural migrant children (Li and Curdt-Christiansen, 2024). It is evident that urban teachers influence the relationship between migrant children and local children through practices of social norms and values, demonstrating adults' impact on children's peer relationships in schools. By contrast, as mentioned above in section 2.4.3, teachers in schools with LBC, normally rural schools, were found to be more supportive, contributing positively to LBC's mental health and cognitive abilities. However, the intervention and impact of teachers on LBC's peer relationships remain inadequately addressed in Chinese LBC's studies. Based on the above-mentioned studies, I assume that subtleties and power dynamics within LBC-teacher relationships also exist. Exploring their influence on LBC's peer relationships in schools is therefore essential.

Parents have been found to play a significant role in shaping children's peer interactions. A study suggests that parenting styles position parents as designers, mediators, supervisors, advisors and consultants in their children's peer relationships, showing the correlation between child-parent relationship and children's peer-to-peer relationships (Ladd and Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2019). Similarly, research on five-six-year-old Turkish children indicates a strong connection between the quality of parent-child relationships and children's peer relationships, with positive parent-child interactions predicting better peer relationships (Arabaci and Demircioğlu, 2021). Moreover, parental marital satisfaction has been found to positively correlate with children's prosocial behaviours in peer interactions (Arabaci and Demircioğlu, 2021).

In Chinese families, Ma (2003) found that positive parenting practices and a supportive family environment significantly contributed to children's altruistic orientation in peer interactions. The study also suggests that strong peer relationships and positive peer influences enhance this altruistic orientation (Ma, 2003). Confucian values and the national moral education program further shape Chinese children's collective orientation in understanding friendships,

with parental intervention playing a key role in friend selection and formation (Woodman and Guo, 2017; Zhu, 2021b). Additionally, hierarchical dynamics between parents and children are evident in parental involvement in children's friend selection (Zhu, 2020b). Also, as mentioned above, in urban schools, the hidden curriculum includes parental decisions about friend selection, affecting rural migrant children. Although migrant children express a desire to befriend urban peers, they often face rejection due to their accents and rural behaviours (Li and Curdt-Christiansen, 2024). Additionally, urban parents discourage their children from forming friendships with rural migrant children (Li and Curdt-Christiansen, 2024).

Given this context, it is crucial to explore the types of social values or norms imposed by Chinese migrant parents and surrogate parents on LBC regarding peer relationships in both family and school settings. The parenting styles of surrogate parents and the roles of migrant parents in LBC's peer relationships are significant factors for understanding LBC's agency in peer interactions.

2.6 Summary

In all, prior studies often portray Chinese LBC as disadvantaged and vulnerable, reinforcing negative stereotypes. These stereotypes, rooted in Chinese LBC research, can be challenged and deconstructed both in academia discourse and in everyday life. Moreover, the voices and perspectives of LBC have been largely overlooked in sociological approaches within the literature on LBC in China. For instance, Xiao (2015) utilised Gidden's model to explore Chinese LBC's agency within structural and cultural constraints, framing their agency as ambivalent attitudes and feelings towards parental migration. This study highlights the existence of LBC's agency, providing a strong rationale for further dismantling the stereotypes.

In addition, the realm of LBC's peer relationships remains under-researched compared to other topics. Building on my assumption that focuses on LBC's agency rather than their vulnerabilities, I aim to explore the types of agency that LBC demonstrate in their interactions with peers.

Based on the literature and arguments presented in section 2.4, both adults and peers are regarded as important figures in Chinese LBC's lives after parental migration, particularly in family and school settings. The power imbalance and

hierarchy between children and parents, surrogate parents, or teachers, along with the influence of Chinese social norms, prompted me to question the nature of the constraints imposed by others in the context of LBC's relational agency in peer relationships. In addition, the power and impact of peers cannot be overlooked. Thus, 'others' in the research questions refers to both peers and adults who interact with and influence LBC in family and school settings.

Chinese LBC's agency is often understood as their ambivalent perspective when weighing the benefits of parental migration against the experience of living with their parents in rural areas (Xiao, 2015b). Aligning with the second research question and drawing on arguments regarding their ambivalent perspectives as well as my arguments on their reshaped interpersonal relationships after parental migration, I also aim to explore how LBC respond to the constraints imposed by others.

The next chapter will address the three elements of the conceptual framework utilised in this research, drawing on prior theories from the sociology of childhood and sociology. These elements correspond to the three research questions outlined above. These afore-mentioned assumptions discussed in this chapter, along with the conceptual framework presented in the next chapter, will be revisited in the methodology chapter (Chapter 4) through a diagram (Diagram 4.3). This diagram will illustrate the linkages between different parts of the thesis and the key points from these sections.

Chapter 3 Theoretical framework

In this chapter, I will employ theories and concepts from both the sociology of childhood and sociology to conceptualise three interconnected elements for this research: relational agency, relational constraints and children's strength or ability to negotiate social normativity and justify themselves, as illustrated in Diagram 3.1. Diagram 3.2 below shows how the three elements relate to different sections of this chapter. By formulating the conceptual framework with its inherent logic, the three elements help address the three research questions correspondingly, as outlined in Chapter 1.

In section 3.1, I will primarily focus on debates in children's agency in the sociology of childhood. This will provide theoretical evidence for Chapter 5 (the first empirical chapter) in response to the first research question. Different approaches to children's agency in this section will be briefly recapitulated for the further discussion of four different types of relational agency, which will be identified later in Chapter 5. The relational aspects of children's agency and the concept of relational constraints will also be mentioned in section 3.1, providing the theoretical basis for Chapter 6 and the transition from Chapter 5 to 6: how I move from relational agency to relational constraints.

In section 3.2, I will mainly discuss essential theories and concepts in sociology that are related to all three elements of the conceptual framework (illustrated below in Diagram 3.2). This section provides a theoretical basis for answering the three research questions. Specifically, sections 3.2.1, 3.2.2, 3.2.3, and 3.2.5 will focus on conceptualising relational constraints and relational agency, while section 3.2.4 will serve as the theoretical basis for all three elements in the conceptual framework.

In section 3.3, I will draw on existing debates in sociology regarding children and youth's ability to negotiate normativity and justify themselves. This will further strengthen the conceptualisation of normativity negotiation and justification when addressing the third research question. Particularly, section 3.3.1 and 3.3.4 will provide the theoretical basis for connecting the two elements: relational constraints and normativity negotiation and justification.

Meanwhile, in section 3.4, I will address debates in children's geographies as the rationale for contextualising this research. Similar to the relational approach discussed across different sections in this chapter, a perspective of children's

geographies is regarded as another holistic approach when conceptualising the three elements. It is also used to justify the use of cross-cultural explanations integrated throughout the thesis, as contextualising childhood is considered essential for understanding it. Thus, based on the relevant theories and concepts from the sociology of childhood and sociology, some of my assumptions will also be made when incorporating the current living conditions Chinese LBC with their peers after parental migration.

My ontological position is that of a social constructivist. I view LBC's reality as constructed through their social interactions (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) with others. Correspondingly, I adopt an interpretivist epistemology, emphasising the co-creation of knowledge through children's perspectives and lived experiences (Schutz, 1967). Children's agency is socially constructed (James et al., 2005). Through children's perspectives and lived experiences, relational constraints imposed by others can be identified. I also argue that children's ability to negotiate social normativity and justify their related social behaviours emerges through their social interactions with others, including both peers and adults. Thus, incorporating debates on children's agency and relational agency, constructing relational constraints, and theorising children's social practices of normativity negotiation and self-justification in this chapter aligns with my constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology. Meanwhile, drawing on debates in children's geographies and cross-cultural perspectives helps illustrate how Chinese children's interactions, perspectives, and lived experiences with peers are socially constructed within the context of Chinese society, where certain social norms are embedded. This also aligns with my constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology.

Although the following theories and concepts have different underpinnings and shortcomings, the focus of this research is on using them to interpret the data sets rather than resolving their contradictions. This is an empirical study rather than a purely theoretical one. At the same time, the diverse theories and concepts discussed below, along with my justification for using them in this research, aim to strengthen my conceptual framework. In this framework, the three key elements are interconnected and supported by evidence from my data sets.

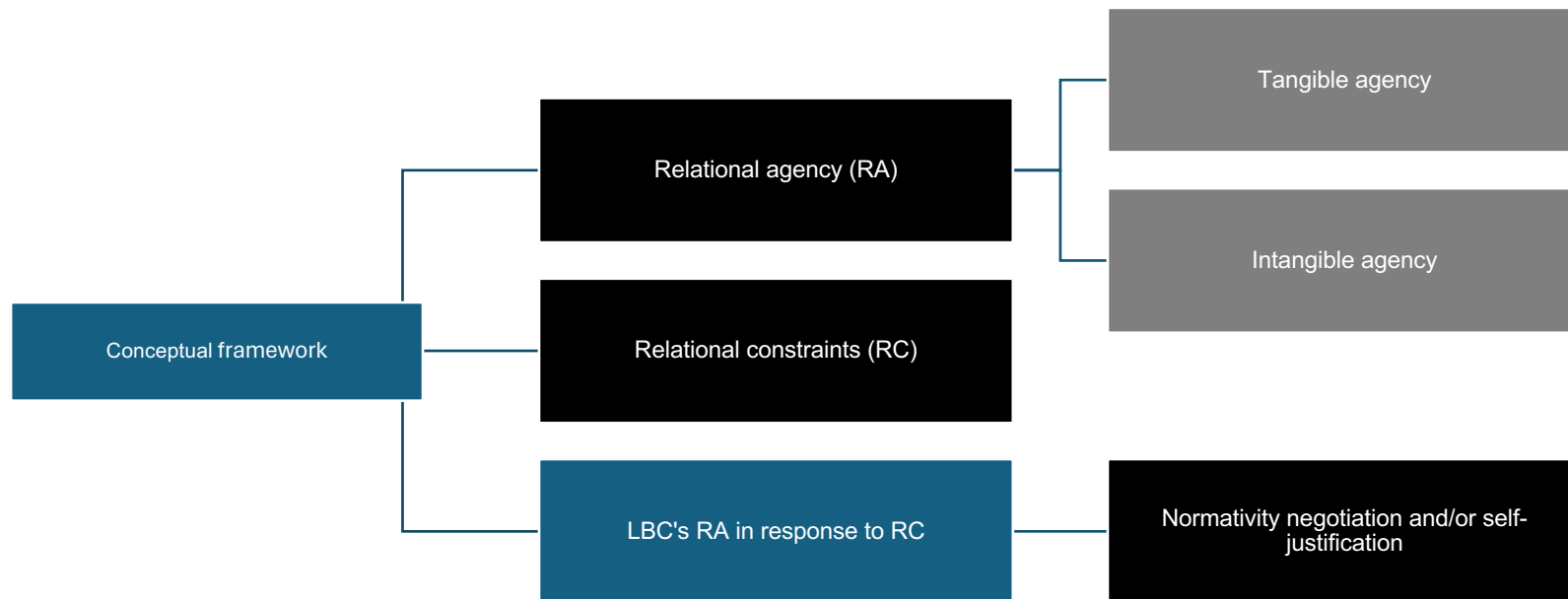
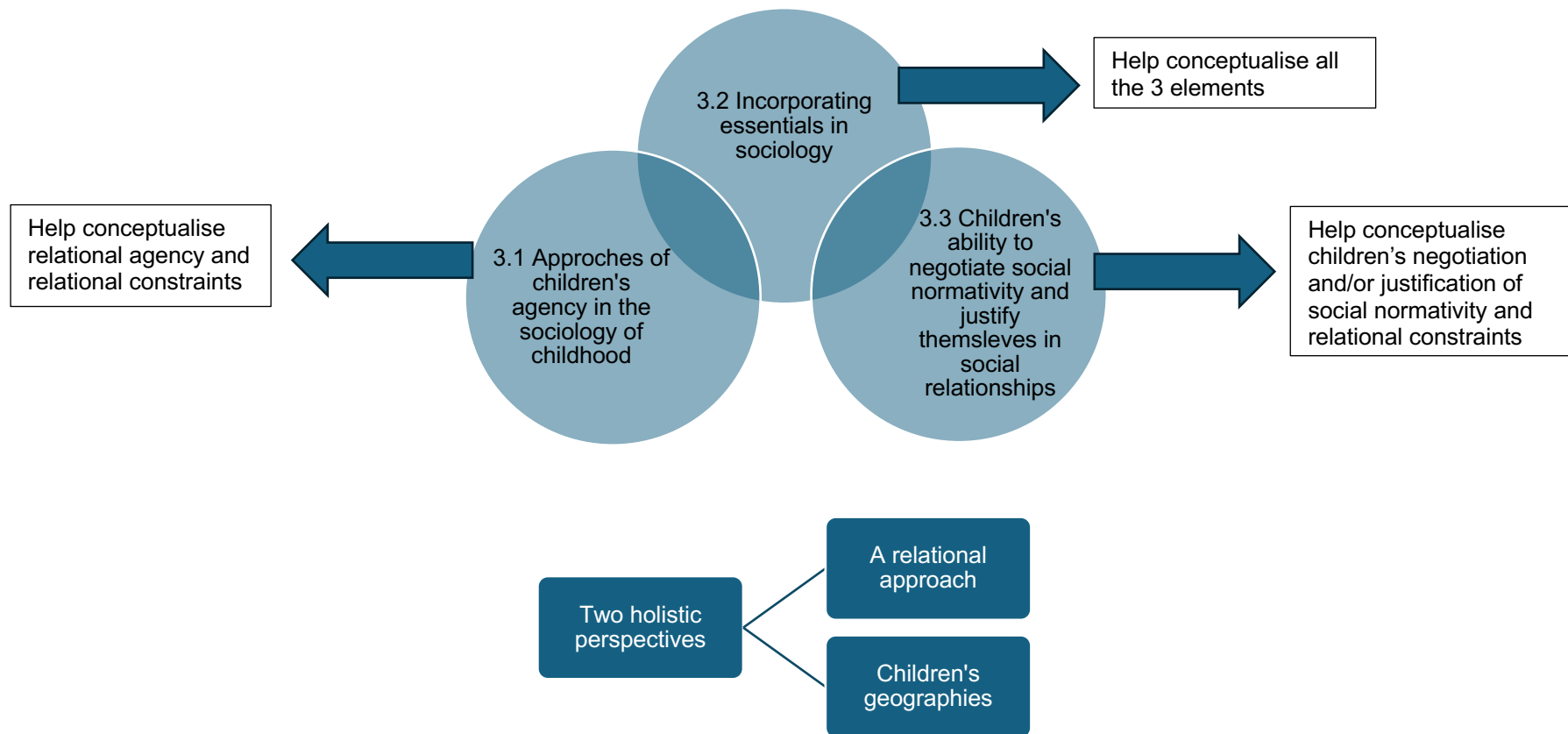
Diagram 3.1. The conceptual framework

Diagram 3.2. The structure of theoretical framework chapter

3.1 Approaches of children's agency in the sociology of childhood

3.1.1 The rationale of utilising debates in children's agency

Regarding the wider research background of utilising the theory of children's agency in Chinese childhood studies, here are some concerns. Being left behind is a global phenomenon (Antia et al., 2020), which indicates the possibility of applying this research to contextualise LBC in a wider society. Applying theories of children's agency to research LBC in China will also benefit the international literature in general on LBC by shifting research paradigms from psychological foci to sociological and pedagogic foci, where LBC's voices and perspectives are more emphasised. The globalisation of LBC studies also aligns with the overarching research paradigm of contextualising the places and everyday spaces where children spend most of their time (Holloway and Valentine, 2000b). This research serves as a connection between children's geographies and the globalisation of LBC studies. A cross-cultural perspective is essential in the globalisation, in childhood studies, and in the debates of children's agency. It adds to our diverse and useful perspective on a shared understanding of various childhoods. Overall, a cross-cultural approach that emphasises the explanation of the context is employed along with children's agency related theories and concepts to support the framing of theories in this chapter. The sociological accounting of agency (Valentine, 2011) is also scarce in the research field of Chinese children (McCarthy et al., 2017), which is also psychologically inclined. The cross-cultural approach will be further discussed with the correlated data analysis methods in methodology chapter (Chapter 4).

Among the debates of child agency in the sociology of childhood, one that particularly stands out and indicates the future directions of the research on child agency is to expand and contextualise child agency in the Majority World (Esser, 2016). Such a strategy makes relevant research on child agency sustainable, as constructing agency in children's social networks (Esser, 2016) in specific contexts helps to understand diverse childhoods. Hence, context matters when globalising children's agency and considering debates in children's geographies. Based on these previous debates in childhood studies and my own reflections, I then focus on children's agency. Therefore, I will

review different approaches in children's agency in the sociology of childhood, incorporating with my arguments, to conceptualise relational agency.

With some knowledge gaps identified in the literature review and few theoretical debates recognised for data collection, I embarked on the long journey of generalising and justifying a theoretical framework that can best represent the perspective of LBC, considering their interactions with peers in this research. The journey has spanned from before the transfer viva was successfully passed without correction at the end of the first year of my PhD until I completed a rough structure of the three empirical chapters (Chapter 5, 6 and 7). Some of the arguments based on the approaches of children's agency were not fully thought through until the first draft of my thesis was completed. The arguments presented in the following sections were gathered not only from my fieldwork notes, but also inspired by my teaching practice in the field of childhood and youth studies. Thus, this theoretical framework was not always as a firmly established and unquestionable structure prior to the fieldwork. Instead, it has been developed throughout my entire PhD.

At the beginning of this journey, the theory of children's agency became a priority since LBC's voices have been rarely explored in the above-mentioned analysis of Chinese LBC's research in the literature review chapter (Chapter 2). Additionally, Xiao's (2015) research on Chinese LBC's agency within their structural and cultural constraints has been always an inspiration for this research. It also aligns with the argument of utilising a thin model (Esser, 2016) in constructing children's agency in another social context. Xiao (2015) applied Giddens's model regarding human agency to prove and argued that Chinese LBC's agency lies in their ambivalent attitude towards parental migration and their current living conditions, when they consider as negatively affected by it.

However, different from Giddens's model of conceptualising human agency within certain constraints of social structure and culture (Giddens, 1984), my focus will shift from Giddens's model of addressing the non-human factors that affect human agency to analysing multiple models in the debates within the scope of child agency. This will be done by emphasising child-adult power disparity and children's participation rights (Thomas, 2000) in the sociology of childhood. Understanding various approaches to researching children's agency

in child-adult relationships will also help me develop my approaches to researching LBC and their peer relationships. The child-adult power disparity refers to the unequal power relations between children and adults (Spyrou, 2011), both of whom are human factors, unlike the structural focus emphasised in Giddens's model. Therefore, the constraints on child agency, compared with those on human agency, are related to adults, demonstrating children's relationship with adults, rather than non-human factors that are not interpersonal. Meanwhile, compared with non-human factors that constrain human agency, relational constraints including how such constraints affect children's peer relationships, are also taken into consideration in this research. The relational dimension of child agency, or the relational approach used in this research, also aligns with the research questions. In addition, theory of children's agency is applicable in researching LBC's peer interactions since peers and peer relationships are also interpersonal human factors.

Theory of children's agency has been discussed from multiple dimensions. The following are several debates in children's agency that have shaped different approaches argued by researchers in the sociology of childhood. I have gathered them and made my own reflections to customise and contextualise relational agency for this research.

3.1.2 Children's active participation and adults' authority on children and their peer relationships

Active participation has been recognised as children's demonstration of their capacity to partake in the decision-making process within adult-dominated institutional contexts (Wyness, 2018). This represents a crucial element of children's active participation, pertaining to the participation rights championed by The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (James, 2007; Spyrou, 2011). The concept of children's active participation, along with its associated critiques and debates, will be synthesised to adapt the application of this approach to the living conditions of LBC. Additionally, the underlying assumptions of mine will also be revealed in light of this adapted approach.

Fundamental meaning of children's active participation

Firstly, the approach of viewing children's agency as their active participation acknowledges child-adult power disparity. It reflects children's awareness of

their positions within adult-led institutional settings and a series of actions related to self-recognition within these settings for the sake of their own interests (Hart, 1997; Tisdall et al., 2008; Wyness, 2009; Staples, 2011). Typically, children, along with their opinions or what is referred to as children's voices (James, 2007), are often overlooked in adult-led institutional or other social settings due to adults' power and authority over children. The power disparity or imbalance between children and adults constitutes the central point of contention in current agency-related debates within the sociology of childhood. This is precisely why this approach is being discussed by reiterating children's perspectives, as it aligns with the relevant discussions in the literature review regarding shifting the perspectives for researching LBC in China and other countries. As I concluded in the literature review, previous research on LBC has seldom given voices to LBC's themselves, nor has it explored LBC's social relationships following parental migration from the LBC's own perspectives. Hence, I am inclined to use this approach here to explore LBC's participation in certain activities involving their peer yet still within adult-led social settings. Although this approach resonates with the call for children's participation rights (Blaisdell et al., 2021), it might be questioned why children need this right of participation when interacting with peers. I will further elaborate on my assumptions based on this approach later when addressing the research context in the following section.

Secondly, this approach mainly consists of three stages, which have been generalised by Wyness as the dominant narrative, the critical narrative and the emergent narrative respectively (Wyness, 2018). In the first stage, children participate in schools or communities, which are typically adult-led institutions, in an attempt to make their voices heard by adults (Wyness, 2016). In the second stage, it has been recognised that children are not fully involved in the final decision-making process within such institutional settings (Wyness, 2009). It is also argued that decision-making related to children does not fully reflect children's will but rather that of adults (Wyness, 2018). Consequently, the authenticity of children's voices becomes the major concern at this stage (Wyness, 2003). In the third stage, it is considered that adult-led institutions are not the sole contexts in which children's agency can be identified, whether by adults within those settings or by adults as researchers (Wyness, 2016).

Working children or street children within their social contexts have been shown to be active participants demonstrating their agency, and they can change their own disadvantaged situations as active agents (Wyness, 2018). Thus, context is the primary focus at the third stage of this approach.

Adapting LBC's active participation

Viewing active participation as children's agency will be adopted in this research to address context-related issues. Regarding the social settings of the authenticity of children's voices, there are mainly two arguments: one emphasises smaller contexts such as school or family in singular socio-cultural context; the other one indicates the need to contextualise children's voices and agency in a wider society (James, 2007; Spyrou, 2011; Wyness, 2018; Spencer et al., 2020), for instance, in the Majority World. By clarifying the meaning of context in childhood studies here and returning to the arguments presented in the literature review, the adult-led settings for LBC could be family, school and/or community where they live, with peers being involved simultaneously. Moreover, children's active participation at the first two stages, addressed by Wyness (2018), has been adequately discussed in detail in the Minority World, rather than in the Majority World (Punch and Tisdall, 2012). Thus, children's agency in the Majority World is an area worth exploring utilising this approach (Punch and Tisdall, 2012).

In fact, Chinese LBC have been proven to be active participants in the decision-making of family migration plans (Connelly et al., 2012). A review article has also emphasised that children have different level of behavioral agency within families in the context of migration (Deng et al., 2022). Children's involvement in family migration decision-making in the UK (Bushin, 2009) has been proven to be active. Therefore, it is assumed that after parental migration, children who have been left behind might continue to practice their agency in their daily social interactions with others, including their peers and other adults. It is worth exploring what their agency looks like after parental migration, as living apart from parents might not be considered as a failure of their participation in the decision-making of parental migration. LBC are aware of the purposes of parental migration: for a better life and/or for their education (Hu, 2019).

Furthermore, the theory in the sociology of childhood from the Minority World that has been used to research LBC in China can also be applied to research LBC in other countries mentioned in the literature review (Chapter 2) mainly located in the Majority World. The debates in decolonising childhood studies (Abebe et al., 2022) seems to conflict with the adoption of theory from the Minority World for research research in the Majority World. However, the argument based on identifying different socio-cultural contexts to contextualise childhood studies actually tends to divide children's agency in the Minority World and the Majority World (Konstantoni, 2012). Thus, there is a risk of reducing mutual understanding in childhood studies that address sociological approaches where some aspects might be universal. Therefore, my assumption based on the above context-relevant debates is that this approach of viewing children's agency as active participation can be applied to conceptualise or adapt child agency for this research.

My assumptions based on the potential impact of adults' power on children's peer relationships in Chinese family and school settings

Regarding these identified smaller social contexts for Chinese LBC and their peers, here are reasons why active participation addressing child-adult power disparity, particularly in family and school, could be employed to research peer relationships which seem to have no adult-related power factors involved in.

Firstly, the smaller contexts, such as school and family contexts, are adult-led settings where LBC have social connections with peers. Hence, the impact of adults on their peer interactions is crucial to consider within these settings.

Secondly, the power imbalance between children and adults can also indirectly affect children's peer interactions since both LBC and their peers are recognised as children constrained by the same groups of adults. Thus, I argue that children's peer interactions must be associated with adults' power or authority over them.

As discussed in section 2.5.3 of Chapter 2, research on the impact of Chinese parents on children's friend selection and/or peer interactions has shown that Chinese parents play a significant role in their children's friendship experience. Zhu (2020) recognised that Chinese parents intervene in their children's friend-making process. Chinese children, as argued, have to choose more and good

friends guided by their parents, which is a collective action reflecting Confucian culture in family education regarding interpersonal relationships (Zhu, 2020a). Chinese children's obedience to their parents or other seniors in the family is considered a good action of filial piety in Chinese family tradition (Yeh et al., 2013; Hansen, 2014). On one hand, Chinese parents' intervention in friend selection can prevent children from potential harm caused by children's peer groups, which resonates with the idea of adults making decisions on behalf of children in the Minority World (Thomas, 2000). On the other hand, it also represents the power and authority of Chinese parents (McCarthy et al., 2017) over their children's daily social lives involving peers. A survey conducted in China also proved that children's peer rejection and acceptance are indirectly associated with parent-child conflicts (Liu et al., 2020). Hence, considering the cultural context of power disparity between children and parents in Chinese families, I assume that LBC's active participation in family context involving their parents is closely related to their interactions with peers in the family. Also, I argue that regarding the definition of peers, I recognise LBC's siblings and cousins (even if they are not of similar age) as peers in family settings given LBC's families have been restructured after parental migration. The conceptual and operational definitions of peers will be addressed in Chapter 4 on methodology.

School is another setting where adults' impact continuously occurs in the realm of Chinese students' peer relationships. Through a comparative analysis of teacher-student relationships in China and USA, culture differences have been identified. Chinese students often value education more, show more respect for and more desire to please multiple groups of adults including their parents and teachers, who are recognised as people with authority, compared to students in the USA (Bear et al., 2014). In fact, the culture of pursuing harmony in school has been proven to impact Chinese children's views of their own social behaviours in school, as well as those of their peers (Bear et al., 2014). As argued, they also regulate peers' behaviour in school (Bear et al., 2014), especially when it confronts traditional morality widely advocated in school. Chinese teachers also tend to help students build and maintain sound and stable relationships as a pedagogical approach to educate students to maintain social harmony in interpersonal relationships (Bear et al., 2014) embedded in

Chinese culture. Thus, driven by such traditional social norms of respecting teachers and their wisdom in society, Chinese students are expected to follow teachers' guidance, speak in class only when are invited by teachers, and wait for teachers to initiate talks (Kirkebæk et al., 2013), rather than act on their own in public.

Even though student-centered instructional theories have been introduced and promoted in recent three decades during several rounds of educational reforms in China (Kirkebæk et al., 2013), exam-oriented education has been forcing teachers to take the lead in the classroom, emphasising collective efficiency for the preparation of standardised tests. Hence, discipline in classrooms and in schools becomes crucial in such efficacy-seeking learning environment with high academic pressure. Behaviours against discipline in class are often recognised as negatively impacting collective learning efficiency, which is also tied to personal interest given education is widely understood as individual means of moving up social ladders (Xiong, 2015). In addition, teacher's authority and position of educating discipline also have broader social impact in China. Students' parents are often expected to side with teachers when there are teacher-student social conflicts in school (Kirkebæk et al., 2013), given parents also respect teachers as traditionally they are recognised as well-educated and learned people not just in school but within Chinese society. Therefore, teacher's authority or power over students is doubled not only because they have more knowledge which most Chinese parents usually do not have to teach students but also because they are respected traditionally and diffusely. Hence, the power imbalance between Chinese teachers and LBC and how it impacts LBC's peer relationships in their daily lives in school is worth exploring.

Summary

Notably, the awareness of children's participation in the adult-led decision-making process, the authenticity of children's voices, and the context of children's active participation and their multiple ways of voicing themselves in front of adults are the key debates of this approach, which regards children's agency as their active participation. From my point of view, the shifting of focus at different stages of the debates shapes the evolving progress of this

approach. Likewise, I argue that the process of LBC in their active participation in voicing themselves within adult-led social settings when socialising with peers may also undergo a similar process. Even though this approach has given rise to debates from different perspectives in constructing children's agency, it is still insightful when making assumptions and contextualising LBC's relational agency in peer relationships. Simultaneously, this concept will be employed to answer the first research question. How this approach was employed in data collection will be explained in section 4.4.2 and 4.5 of Chapter 4, methodology.

3.1.3 Children's voiced and silenced agency in relation to their peers

Viewing children's agency as their social competence and capacity is another approach to construct their agency (Valentine, 2011). Similar to the debates in children's active participation, seeing and comprehending children's competence also has encountered criticism emphasising the authenticity of their presentation of competence. It is argued that valuing what children say is as significant as attending to what children do not say (Spyrou, 2016). Thus, children's voiced competence along with their silences has formulated relevant debates regarding the approach of viewing children's agency as their social competence.

Although this approach remains in disputes, I argue that it is still very useful to consider what constitutes the authentic social competence of LBC. This approach also facilitates the exploration regarding how LBC enact relational agency in peer interactions, which is the first research question outlined above. When reviewing this approach and corresponding debates, I will contextualise LBC's agency in the below sections.

Children's social competence or sociability as their agency in adult-led settings and its authenticity

Different from viewing children's agency as their active participation in adult-led institutional settings, another approach considers children's agency as children's social competence or capacity (Valentine, 2011). Debates regarding this approach also emerge concerning the authenticity of children's demonstration of their competence. Questions such as how adults measure children's capabilities and how adults recognise children's multiple ways of demonstrating competence are significant within these debates. At the

beginning stage of this approach, an estimation of children's agency based on certain measuring criteria designed by adult researchers is predominant (Alanen and Mayall, 2002; Valentine, 2011; Mayall, 2013) of this approach. In my view, the core of this approach is to demonstrate that children perceive having certain competence to exercise agency in various adult-led contexts. However, it has later been argued that such imposed criteria by adults could potentially lead to the exclusion of some children who do not demonstrate their competence in a conventional or normative way recognised by adults (Valentine, 2011). This argument is also in line with the second stage of viewing children's agency as active participation, as discussed in section 3.1.2 above, which emphasises the authenticity of children's voices and participation. It assumes that children might exercise their agency in some social contexts (Wyness, 2018) that are not fully recognised by adults. It is also contended that children with limited choices would not have the opportunity to participate as expected by adults (Ferguson, 2003). Hence, researchers using this approach to measure children's agency might run the risk of overlooking children's developmental immaturity (Valentine, 2011) in their exercise of agency. Here, children with developmental immaturity refer to those who are regarded as having little or no competence to act independently due to the institutional constraints imposed by adults (Ferguson, 2003; Valentine, 2011). Thus, I argue that whether children's agency can be recognised by adults depends on the inclusive and exclusive criteria set by adult researchers to measure children's agency.

Zhu (2019) also explored Chinese children's understanding and experiences in different types of friendships in school context. It is also evident that Chinese children can also differentiate who are close friends, who are just friends (Zhu, 2019), which, I argue, also demonstrates their agency to categorise friends and friendships based on their own judgements. It also aligns with the notion of viewing children's relational agency as their criteria using and making. Hence, I argue that Chinese children's ability to categorise and differentiate peers demonstrate their agency practices in peer interactions. Also, in Konstantoni's (2012) research on children's relational agency with peers focusing on how children view their similarities or differences regarding age, gender and race, it is evident that those social identities of children are formulated by their

relational agency with peers. In this case, peers have an impact on children's construction of social identities, as well as relational agency. Hence, I argue that viewing peers are those who have an impact on children's agency is necessary to this research.

Thus, I argue that if researchers can establish certain measuring criteria for child participants, children themselves, as active social agents, can also create their own criteria when interacting with peers to indicate their social competence.

The two parallel viewpoints, which respectively emphasise the authenticity of children's active participation and their demonstration of ability, have somehow shifted the perspectives for exploring children's agency. Whether it is from adults' perspective or children's perspective to understand agency, clearly, different ways of perceiving and comprehending children's agency are essential. In the literature review, I also highlighted a shift in academic approaches to studying Chinese LBC in the literature review—from a psychological focus on deficits to a sociological emphasis on children's voices and lived experiences. Thus, rethinking how LBC and their agency are understood aligns with this broader shift.

Children's sociability in peer relationships

In fact, children's social competence in peer relationships is not a newly emerging research area. Specifically, children's social competence or sociability in peer relationships is recognised as children's agency in peer interactions and relationships in this research. There are three stages recognised in children's social competence in peer relationships: the first stage is the early establishment of research on children's social competence, which originates in psychology, sociology and education; the second stage mainly defines and describes children's social competence, showing that children can make themselves accepted in peer groups; the third stage focuses children's sociability in dealing with the changes and challenges encountered in peer interactions (Ladd, 2005). Innovative research agendas in this field also direct relevant research to involve gender and culture issues (Ladd, 2005), which is more sociologically inclined.

Thus, there are signs in the research area to support my assumption for this research regarding viewing children's agency as their competence and capacity in peer relationships and interactions. However, within the research field addressing children's social competence in peer relationships, adults' impact seems inadequately addressed. Considering the powerful impact of adults on children in the sociology of childhood, the need to contextualise childhoods studies, and my assumptions made when contextualising children's active participation in section 3.1.2 above, it is indeed worth researching adults' impact on children's social competence with peers. Apparently, this assumption is also applicable to research LBC's agency in peer relationships, with adults' impact involved, when the meaning of children's competence is understood as a type of their agency.

To reiterate, I argue that should researchers be able to develop specific criteria for conducting scientific surveys to measure children's competence, children themselves can also produce their own social criteria or utilise existing ones similar to those employed by adult researchers to assess their peers. Hence, criteria making for peers or adopting certain existing criteria can also be considered as LBC's competence or capacity in peer relationships, even if such competence does not always associate with their active participation in adults' decision-making process. Perhaps, they make their own decisions silently, leaving this area under-explored by adult researchers.

Silenced agency

Whether children have the opportunities to prove themselves (Ferguson, 2003; Wyness, 2018) determines how they attempt or choose not to draw adults' attention and have a say. I think if they lack such opportunities, they might take the initiative to create them to voice themselves. However, at times, children tend to withhold their thoughts from adults because they are aware of the constraints and power exerted by adults, which, in turn, impacts their manifestation of agency. Hence, I argue that it does not imply that children who remain silent lack competence entirely. Nor does it mean that silent children have insufficient agency due to developmental immaturity. Instead, how children assess their relational conditions with adults (for instance, whether adults seem

approachable or not) might be one of the numerous reasons influencing their decisions to attract adults' attention or not.

Evidence can be found in the argument of exploring full range of children's voices (Spyrou, 2016). Drawing on post-structuralism and related critiques on voices, Spyrou (2016) advocates for valuing children's silences to fully understand the construction of children's agency. By situating children's ways of speaking and remaining silent within institutional settings, interactional activities, and discursive contexts (Spyrou, 2016), we can uncover what truly matters to children, rather than adhering to the ways adults expect them to express themselves. Thus, I think that viewing agency through the multiple reasons for children's silences aligns with the argument of researching the authenticity of their presentation of competence or active participation.

Children might choose to stay silent if they resist adults whom they perceive as having the power to restrict them. Therefore, I argue that remaining silent about their competence can also be seen as their own choice or an exercise of their agency. Similarly, this can be applied to the approaches for researching LBC's peer relationships, which involves adults' constraints. Particularly, when Chinese children are educated to maintain collective social harmony and safeguard public interests, their individuality and personality (Hansen, 2014) might lead to their silences in social life, which is worthy of exploration. It is evident that Chinese children are aware of the conflicts between the self and others (Zhu, 2021b) in their social lives, accompanied by emotions that remain unexpressed.

Children have their own reasons for remaining silent in certain social settings involving peers. In such case, I think they can choose whether to keep silent or not, and whether to draw peers' attention or not. Additionally, I argue that adults and the constraints they impose could be the reasons for such silent social behaviours of children, considering the contextualised power and impact of Chinese adults on Chinese children's active participation involving peers as discussed in section 3.1.2. Thus, children's reasons for being silent can, to some extent, be regarded as a type of their agency to assess social conditions or their ability to gauge the situation before taking further steps. In LBC studies, as argued in the literature review chapter (Chapter 2), their voices and their

viewpoints have seldom been heard or researched. Hence, it is undoubtedly worthwhile to uncover such silences within academia.

Summary

In summary, I argue that children's competence can be a set of criteria established and evaluated by themselves when interacting with peers. Children's competence as agency, which remains silent, might fall outside the realm of adult knowledge and exploration. This is because adults' power and the constraints they impose can manifest as the reasons for children's silence in their construction of agency. Exploring the multiple manifestations of children's competence from an adult's perspective can be quite challenging. Thus, adopting a perspective that emphasises peers and peer interactions might alleviate the difficulty of uncovering and describing the silent agency of children, given that children's peers are generally considered to be on an equal social footing with them.

The approach of viewing children's competence and capacity as a type of agency is also associated with research related to children's rights and feminism. It has been contended in prior relevant research that childhood studies have benefited from feminism research since people have gradually come to recognise that children should have equal rights to adults, just as women should have equal rights to men (Benson, 1990; Wihstutz, 2016). Therefore, I argue that children's competence or capacity should be valued in the same way that adults' competence is treated. Consequently, I think children's competencies in peer interactions should also be regarded as as important as their competencies in child-adult relationships.

3.1.4 Addressing relational sectors of children's agency when mapping relational constraints for children's peer relationships

Another approach to viewing children's agency in their social relationships has emerged in recent few years. Based on the discussions of the power disparity between children and adults, this approach regards children's agency as relational interdependence (Abebe, 2019), indicating children's social competence as well as constraints imposed by others, usually adults. When demystifying children's agency, some consider children's agency to be at the same level as adults', while others address the developmental immaturity of

children's agency (Valentine, 2011). Thus, I think the concept of interdependence helps bridge the knowledge gap between the two and incorporate adults' impact on children in child-adult social relationships in the construction of children's agency. When exploring this concept, I will focus on children's social relationships and child-adult power disparity to contextualise the use of this concept in this research.

Relational interdependence

The emphasis on children's competency or capacity can lead to the neglect of their inadequacy in exercising agency (Valentine, 2011), according to some current debates on child agency. Fortunately, an approach focusing on children's relational agency utilises the relationship between children and adults to integrate the apacity and dependency of children's agency together. This approach does not discuss the ways children utter and the corresponding actions they take. Instead, it regards children's agency as relative and dependent competence in their social relationships with adults. It is evident in recent debates that the concept of immaturity in children's agency is incorporated, rather than being acknowledged as full agency, of which adults are usually the possessors. Wihstutz (2016) uses the notion of responsiveness from a feminist ethics of care as an approach to conceptualise child agency (Wihstutz, 2016). This approach adopts theories of childcare and female's family role in childrearing. Starting from embedding child agency in specific socioeconomic conditions, children are depicted as active social actors in various social relationships (Wihstutz, 2016). Drawing on theories of feminist ethics of care, Wihstutz (2016) conceptualised child agency within the care relationships between children and their parents as interdependent. Also, the term belonging participants is used to describe children in the condition of being interdependent with adults while being recognised as active social agents (Wihstutz, 2016; Abebe, 2019). Hence, I understand that children are active social agents in an interdependent relationship with adults (normally parents), while at the same time belonging to their parents or being subordinate to other adults, such as teachers, in some other way. This conceptualisation is further supported by the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, which highlights adults' dominant positions in children's peer interactions within school and family

contexts, as both settings are led by adults. Likewise, this approach can still be adopted to explore the relational constraints imposed by others (adults or LBC's peers) on LBC's agency in peer relationships in this study. This assumption of mine will be contextualised soon below. Furthermore, I think the notion of interdependence in the social construction of children's agency has the potential to help determine how LBC practise their agency in peer relationships and the role of adults in them. The second and third research questions can thus be addressed through the application of this concept.

Relational agency and power disparity

Reflections on how to reconstruct children's agency have emerged in recent debates. A relational model for reconceptualising children's agency, proposed by Esser (Esser et al., 2016), provides this research with evidence to conceptualise and contextualise children's relational agency. Esser (2016) employs relational social theories as an approach to reconceptualise children's agency as the production of their different identities within specific social networks and contexts (Esser et al., 2016). The term relational agency has also been emphasised in Esser's (2016) model regarding agency. However, in contrast to the notion of interdependence between children and adults, this model considers children's agency as their independence in social relationships as individuals (Esser, 2015; Esser, 2018). Esser (2016) also argues that adults' power over children determines children's interdependence as their relational agency. The so-called generational hierarchy is embedded in the relational interdependency involving children and adults (Esser, 2018; Abebe, 2019). Consequently, I argue that interdependence is regarded as the relational constraint of children's relational agency. In other words, the notion of interdependence inherently assumes that there is power imbalance between children and adults. This prompts me to question: what the relational constraints of LBC's relational agency in peer relationships? Also, as individuals, do LBC have such interdependence embedded in their relational agency with peers?

The significance of taking a relational approach

Other researchers also utilise this relational approach to conceptualise children's agency. Konstantoni (2012) takes into account social relationships, connections, and the associated dynamics when exploring children's agency,

social identities and the interdependence of multiple connections (Konstantoni, 2012). Raithelhuber (2015) points out that Konstantoni does not place significant emphasis on children's agency as a non-human product (a material aspect) resulting from their active participation or the exercise of their competence. Instead, the focus lies on non-material social interactions when conceptualising the agency, which implies that Konstantoni considered social interactions in order to conceptualise children's agency. This also coincides with the assumption regarding LBC's relational agency in peer relationships made in this research, given that children's peer relationships are subordinate to their social interactions.

Moreover, Porpora (2013) extends Giddens' model of social structuration by highlighting the importance of the social relationships involved in specific social structures and cultures (Archer et al., 2013; Porpora, 2013). It is argued that the rules, systems, and positions of people are all manifested in social relationships, demonstrating equivalent structural and cultural values (Esser et al., 2016). Thus, based on Porpora's argument about agency, the relational approach is of crucial importance. Meanwhile, Raithelhuber (2015) also argues that the relational approach to conceptualise children's agency should be explored in greater depth, based on his analysis of some identifiable relational approaches from different research (Raithelhuber, 2015; Esser et al., 2016).

Other arguments from childhood studies also support the significance of using a relational approach to research children's agency. Mayall (2013) has generalised the correlation between social relationships and agency when reflecting on the sociological approaches in childhood studies. Even though relevant research dates back to the 60s and 70s, they still maintain close ties with the relational approach in constructing children's competence in building social relationships with others during their learning in institutional settings and other social encounters (Mayall, 2013). As Mayall (2013) further emphasises, the discourses of children's agency should be contextualised within social interactions with peers and adults in their daily lives.

Furthermore, after identifying the liberal model (which is based on liberalism and individualism and will be discussed in section 3.2 below) and the social model of children's agency (which is normally based on Giddens's model of

structuration theories, social movement theories, and feminism and will also be addressed in section 3.2 below), Valentine (2011) compares the two models and argues that the social model is more effective in adding more dimensions to the social construction of children's agency. Hence, I think that a social model might be useful for introducing more dimensions and for doing a better job of conceptualising children's agency.

Contextualising Chinese adults' power and authority as the relational constraints of children's agency with peers

As discussed in section 3.1.3 of this chapter and section 2.5.3 of Chapter 2, Chinese parents and teachers frequently involve themselves in children's peer interactions within family and school settings. This is due to the impact of Confucian culture, which reinforces discipline and collectivism in Chinese social norms. Chinese adults possess the power and authority over children in their interpersonal relationships. While imposing Confucian values on children regarding proper social behaviour, Chinese adults often interfere in children's daily lives. Hence, such imposition or guidance of social values is regarded as adults' power and authority in this research. Based on this social context, it is probable that Chinese children would choose to remain silent when their individual interests confront with the public good (Zhu, 2020a). Consequently, Chinese adults' power and authority can also be seen as constraints on children's relational agency.

Moreover, when adopting a relational approach, these constraints imposed by Chinese adults can also be considered as relational. As integral components of Confucian culture, the enduring social network (*guanxi*⁷) and the norms of interpersonal relationship (*renqing*⁸) are also emphasised in Chinese social culture (Barbalet, 2021). Performing *renqing* and maintaining *guanxi* and *mianzi*⁹ (face) are generally recognised as initial steps for Chinese people to achieve certain goals and resolve issues (Leung et al., 2014; Wang and Pak, 2015). The same applies to my PhD project when I approach child participants and adult gatekeepers. People, including children, are aware of the power of social networks in Chinese society, such as their influence on resource

⁷ In Chinese characters: 关系.

⁸ In Chinese characters: 人情.

⁹ In Chinese characters: 面子.

allocation (Wang and Pak, 2015). Researchers in business studies refer to these norms as instrumental rituals often employed by adults to explain business operation and economic prosperity in China (Yen et al., 2017). However, there has been relatively little exploration in the areas of Chinese family, childhood, and school education regarding these social norms in relation to relationships. Therefore, I argue that it is essential to consider these norms as constraints on LBC's agency in peer relationships when analysing their agency within its context. As constraints, these norms might be imposed by both adults and peers in LBC's interactions with their peers.

Furthermore, taking a relational approach to constructing LBC's agency aligns with the point made in the literature review about the insufficient focus on LBC's social relationships in previous LBC studies. Notably, after parental migration, the family structure is reshaped, leading to more complex family communications involving other left-behind peers in family settings. Compared with Giddens' model, although cultural factors are taken into account when analysing children's agency in this research, the focus of my approach is on relationships when exploring the discursive daily encounters in the social lives of LBC. My explanations of the cultural aspects in this research are consistent with existing accounts of children's agency that emphasise their voices within peer relationships.

Summary

In summary, the employment of a relational approach in constructing the agency of Chinese LBC's with their peers is evident in previous relevant research. Relational agency itself is crucial for reconstructing children's agency, considering that the relational interdependency between children and adults is one of the key factors in the debates on children's agency. A relational approach also aids in uncovering the potential relational constraints that adults impose on children's agency within their social relationships with peers, given that Confucian culture endows Chinese adults with authority or power over children in line with Chinese social norms, this becomes especially relevant. The contextualisation of a relational approach to research children's agency in this research prompts me to pose the question: how do LBC respond to these relational constraints imposed on them by others within the Chinese context?

3.2 Incorporating essentials in sociology to conceptualise relational agency, constraints and normativity negotiation and justification

Below are some essential background theories related to agency and children's agency within the field of sociology. Based on these diverse theoretical focuses, scholars have constructed different types of agency and children's agency, which reflects distinct approaches. It is also worthwhile discussing the theoretical foundations of children's agency from the perspective of sociology in order to support my argument for shifting the perspective in LBC studies from psychology to sociology. After briefly introducing the background theories, I will illustrate how they are utilised to conceptualise relational agency, relational constraints, and normativity negotiation and justification. As mentioned earlier, Diagram 3.2 also depicted the linkages between these essential theories in sociology and their corresponding elements of the conceptual framework.

3.2.1 Liberalism, individualism and social contract theory

The moral model of agency, or moral agency of children, has been considered as an approach that overestimates children's ability to act purposefully in civic participation based on some previous theoretical assumptions (Benson, 1990). It is an approach founded on the concepts of liberalism, individualism and the theories of the social contract (Valentine, 2011). Children have been shown to be capable of accepting the authority and power by which they can be governed by adults (Valentine, 2011). To some extent, however, children cannot fully understand and take responsibility for exercising their agency at such a high level as adults do. This high level of agency involves more than acting purposefully and is regarded as a minimal agency (Alderson and Montgomery, 1996; Valentine, 2011). This approach treats children as equivalent to mature adult citizens, an understanding supported by scholars in the sociology of childhood (Alderson and Montgomery, 1996).

The process of negotiation is central to the theory of social contract. Nevertheless, I argue that children can negotiate within a relatively smaller context, such as within the family or at school, in their relationship with adults who are assumed to hold power or authority. The application of social contract theory can be combined with the assumptions made regarding children's daily lives and developmental immaturity (Valentine, 2011). Hence, I argue that

situating children's agency within a more specific social context, rather than questioning their capacity for moral agency, aligns more closely with Abebe's (2019) argument about the interdependency of child-adult relationships. This stands in contrast to approaches that treat children as social agents with agency equivalent to that of adults in civic participation. Meanwhile, children's ability to negotiate has also been demonstrated to be distinctive in child-adult relationships (Alanen and Mayall, 2002). This forms the third element of the conceptual framework, indicating LBC's capability to negotiate social normativity in peer relationships and their competence to justify themselves when interacting with peers. Both their direct negotiations with peers and those involving both peers and adults are taken into account and will be further conceptualised in section 3.3 below.

3.2.2 Giddens's structuralism

Giddens's model is useful for identifying the societies or various social contexts in which children live in (Giddens, 1986; Valentine, 2011). It enables an understand of the embedded structures and cultures in children's agency. It is argued that children's agency is constrained by the specific structures and cultures in which they are situated (Chatterjee et al., 2019). In my view, this approach resonates with the argument emphasise childhood embodiment and children's geographies. In the concept of children's embodiment, researchers concentrate on how external environmental changes affect children's perceptions of their bodies, emotions, and other experiences (Mayall, 2013). The external environments are regarded as the structures (such as school or family) and cultures (social norms in different contexts) within which children have been shown to be constrained (Alanen and Mayall, 2002; Mayall, 2013). Meanwhile, in the field of children's geographies, researchers are interested in understanding children's living conditions across different social contexts and uncovering how different childhoods can be by utilising geographical perspectives (Aitken, 2005; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2010). Contextualising childhood is crucial in the debates within children's geographies, which requires explanations of different structures or cultures. From my perspective, Giddens's approach and its connections with childhood

embodiment and children's geographies offer this research a theoretical basis for discussing agency within the Chinese context.

Although employing Giddens's structuralism has been criticised for the risk of neglecting participation as the core essence of children's agency (Valentine, 2011), it helps in reflecting on the constraints that affect children's participation when utilising a relational approach to reveal LBC's relational agency. Moreover, the constraints imposed by adults may prompt children's participation and other forms of agency. More specifically, it has been argued that rather than being constrained by a particular structure or culture, children's agency is constrained by their dependence on their relationships with adults (Valentine, 2011). I support this point, as discussions of child-adult power disparity and children's agency necessarily involve an examination of the conditions shaping their social relationships. When conceptualising the relational constraints imposed by others while researching LBC's relational agency with peers in this research, structural and cultural constraints seem to be more readily identifiable compared with relational constraints.

3.2.3 Social movement and Feminism theories

Social movement theories (Liebel et al., 2012) have also been utilised to construct children's agency. Empowering children and raising awareness of the institutional constraints involved are key aspects within the debates surrounding this approach (Hoggett, 2001; Qvortrup et al., 2005; Valentine, 2011). Children's autonomy, their active participation in gaining and safeguarding their own rights (Cockburn, 1998), as well as adults' awareness of these aspects within institutional settings, all fall within the scope of these debates. This approach to conceptualising children's agency aligns with the previously mentioned approaches that emphasise children's voices, participation, and rights within institutional settings (James, 2007; Wyness, 2009; Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010; Spyrou, 2011). Moreover, in line with what has been discussed regarding Chinese children's sense of collectivism in section 3.1.2 and 3.1.3, the concept of a group's collective actions for change in social movement theory (Tilly, 1978) can be applied to conceptualise LBC's relational agency as their collective actions for change when encountering power dynamics in peer relationships. All of this assists in conceptualising LBC's active participation and voices in their

peer relationships within this research. Adequate justification for this has already been provided in section 3.1.2 and 3.1.3. However, I argue that the aforementioned debates on both the authenticity of children's participation and voices somewhat deviate from emphasising children's autonomy. Emphasising children's active participation and voices is an attempt to reveal children's agency within the constraints and authority of adults (or how adults' agency shapes children's agency), leaving children's autonomy as an under-researched strength. Thus, clearly distinguishing between children's strengths and those of adults' is essential for refocusing on the former and its specific dimensions. Incorporating feminist theory to conceptualise children's agency offers one such approach.

Attention has also been given to differentiating children's and adults' agencies when the former was regarded as children's deficiency rather than strength (Lister, 2012). Feminism theories distinguish children from adults by viewing children as a marginalised or subordinate group whose strength has been underestimated by adults. This provides a means of comparing children in adult-led institutions with women in male-led contexts (Chafetz, 1989; Lister, 2012). Consequently, feminism contributes to the empowerment of children's agency when it has been underestimated. This approach embodies a sense of equality-based empowerment for constructing children's agency (Holloway and Valentine, 2000a; Holloway and Valentine, 2000b; Lister, 2012), while also differentiating between children's and adults' agencies. Treating children's agency equally in this research provides a theoretical framework to emphasise LBC's agency, given that in previous studies on LBC in China, their parents are often considered the dominant decision-makers regarding migration plans and childrearing plans after migration.

In my opinion, children could be treated unequally by their peers, which aligns with the arguments in the conceptualisation of children's agency that incorporates social movement and feminism theories. It is also worthwhile to explore the differences between LBC's agency and that of their peers' (both LBC and non-LBC) in dealing with the unequal treatment recognised by LBC, as this might contribute to the overall conceptualisation of Chinese children's relational agency. Meanwhile, a sense of autonomy within children's agency can

be applied to conceptualise children's strength in negotiating normativity and justifying related social behaviour, which will be elaborated in section 3.3 below.

3.2.4 Key aspects of post-structuralism

The following key aspects of post-structuralism assist in conceptualising the three elements within my conceptual framework. They also provide guidance for the use of discourse analysis in my methodology and dismantle multiple layers of binarism regarding agency and constraints that have been previously justified.

Power theory

From my perspective, Foucault's power theory aligns with discussions related to social injustice or equality when incorporating theories of social movement and feminism to explore children's agency (Alanen and Mayall, 2002; Mayall, 2013). Specifically, there is a power imbalance between men and women, as well as between institutional authorities and individuals, which gives rise to a force of resistance from the subordinate groups. These so-called subordinate groups have the need to safeguard their interests, just as children need to assert themselves when the power that adults hold over them is acknowledged.

Foucault's power theories are employed in this research to support the approaches used to conceptualise children's relational agency and the constraints imposed on it. Children are also included in Foucault's discussions on governmentality, which helps in identifying adults' power over children (Foucault, 1982; Valentine, 2011). The everyday aspects of children's social lives are seen as a manifestation of the power relationship and power imbalance between children and adults within their relationships (Foucault, 1982). Hence, when conceptualising children's relational agency in peer relationships, I argue that it is worthwhile to explore how adults establish and exert their power and authority within children's peer relationships and how this impacts those relationships. In this research, the roles that adults play in children's peer relationships are understood as the relational constraints they impose on LBC's relational agency with their peers.

Understanding the roles of adults in LBC's social lives with peers offers adults certain insights into the everyday experience of LBC, making this research more

applicable in real-life contexts. The roles of adults are also regarded as the hidden curriculum (Ayesh, 2018) for LBC in both family and school settings within in this research. Adults might be the reasons of a potential power imbalance between LBC and their peers. Scrutinising the potential impact of adults' power on children's peer relationships helps in understanding the potential relational constraints that adults, or perhaps even LBC's peers, impose on LBC. In summary, power theory provides diverse perspectives for researching LBC's relational agency with peers, as well as the relational constraints imposed by adults, or by LBC's peers.

Rejection of universal truth

In post-structuralism, the ideas put forward by Foucault (1980) and Lyotard (1984) regarding the contextualization of knowledge within diverse power dynamics convey a sense of rejection towards universal truth. At the same time, the construction of knowledge ought to take into account the varying and contingent languages and cultures present in diverse contexts (Howarth, 2013). When conceptualising children's ability to negotiate social normativity in this research, it is related to their rejection to certain universalised truths, which, I argue, can be seen as their reactions or manifestation of agency in breaking free from the constraints recognised as power imposed on them. In other words, if we consider a relational approach, LBC's rejection to universalised social normativity within the Chinese context could be regarded as a type of their relational agency when exploring their responses to the imposed relational constraints. This also demonstrates how LBC's construct social normativity in their peer interactions.

Meanwhile, with an emphasis on diverse languages and cultures, the above argument of mine within post-structuralism aligns with the application of discourse analysis in my methodology, which will be covered in the next chapter. These arguments also support the use of cross-cultural perspectives in children's geographies, which will also be addressed in section 3.4 below.

Critique of binary opposition

Within the key aspects of post-structuralism, a critique of binary opposition is given significant emphasis (Derrida, 1981). In fact, I identified multiple dimensions of binarism in the assumptions presented in this chapter. They

include the binary power relationship between children and adults, the binarism in understanding children's full agency versus their developmental immaturity, the binarism between relational agency and constraints, and the binarism of LBC's vulnerabilities and agency. Based on the identification of these multiple dimensions of binarism, I argue that the concept of interdependency between children and adults (as mentioned in section 3.1.4) precisely highlights the reciprocity between them, rather than presenting them in a binary opposition. Moreover, if we consider children's agency as their strength to negotiate or justify in order to reach a mutual understanding within their relationships, then all the binarism that has arisen might be alleviated. Their negotiation could commence from their recognition of the power or constraints imposed on their relational agency. Additionally, I argue that such negotiation might involve both peers and adults. Further relevant discussion will be provided in section 3.3 below.

Meanwhile, a binarism regarding the voiced or silenced competence of children is evident in prior debates on children's agency, specifically in section 3.1.3 on children's voiced and silenced agency. As previously argued, children's active participation might not be conventionally recognised, which, I think, further resonates with the advocacy for eliminating or reducing binary opposition in post-structuralism. This implies that children might actively express themselves verbally but remain inactive in effecting changes through their own initiatives. This can also be applied to conceptualise their negotiation or justification of social normativity as LBC's voiced yet not participative relational agency in this chapter, since LBC might have their own construction of relational constraints, and not just those related to relational agency or social normativity.

Deconstruction of knowledge

In post-structuralism, the deconstruction of knowledge and meaning hinges on the identification of power in the formation of orthodox knowledge (Derrida, 1981; Foucault, 1980). This aligns with my intention to dispel the stereotypes prevalent in LBC studies by shifting the research focus from psychological aspects to sociological ones. As was also argued in my literature review chapter (Chapter 2), most of the dominant psychological perspectives tend to regard LBC as problematic children, thereby demonstrating the powerful

hold these views have in the knowledge related to LBC. The key to deconstructing this dominant position lies in dismantling the power that stigmatizes LBC, as such stigmatization gives rise to negative portrayals that are rather difficult to eliminate within academia.

Meanwhile, the psychological stigmatisation of LBC has been shown to be quite potent in daily practice (Gu, 2022). However, this can be deconstructed through the knowledge and perspectives offered by sociology, which focus on children's potential and strength. Empowering the sociological dimensions in LBC studies also depends on local discourse. Derrida (1981) emphasised text analysis as a method for empowering local discourse by zeroing in on hidden assumptions and internal contradictions that are not fixed. Consequently, the interpretation of text messages and the transcription of interviews in Chinese can assist in uncovering the hidden assumptions and internal contradictions that are embedded within them. This aspect of interpretation is also part of the use of discourse analysis, which involves specific language and culture and will be elaborated on in the methodology section (Chapter 4).

An integration of subjectivity and objectivity in relation to continuum and interdependence in children's agency

The idea of a coherent and stable self has been called into question through the utilization of the concepts of subjectivity and identity within post-structuralism (Howarth, 2013). Post-structuralists perceive subjectivity and identity as fragmented and as being constructed via diverse discourses and social practices. As such, I argue that this perspective can also be applied to reconstruct the multiple dimensions of relational agency, given that children's agency is a manifestation of children's subjectivity (Holloway et al., 2019). Meanwhile, LBC's relationships are dynamic, not solely due to variations in parental migration status but also because children themselves are constantly changing. In line with identifying the continuum and interdependence within children's agency (Abebe, 2019), children's social relationships are a manifestation of these variations that influence their sense of subjectivity in agency, which is something that post-structuralists would take into account, as well as being relevant to the reconstruction of children's agency in the sociology of childhood. Hence, I argue that LBC's social relationships also give rise to

objective constraints that are relational in nature within the different structural settings of LBC. Since the identification of subjectivity implies that of objectivity, by discerning the multiple dimensions of LBC's relational agency, the relational constraints can be determined.

Moreover, by utilising the debates regarding binarism in post-structuralism, the concept of interdependence in children's agency showcases the reciprocity between children and adults, rather than an oppositional relationship. Based on this assumption of mine, children's reactions to the imposed relational constraints, which represent objectivity, also constitute their relational agency as subjectivity. Additionally, children's approaches to dissolving the oppositional binarism recognised as the relationship between relational agency and relational constraint in this research are also part of this. LBC's responses to relational constraints, or their means of mitigating the binarism, are understood as their competence or ability to negotiate normativity in this research, and this will be further elaborated on in section 3.3 below.

3.2.5 A sense of social inequality and an awareness of constraints

In fact, in the sections except 3.2.2, a sense of social inequality is clearly evident when incorporating theories such as liberalism, individualism, social movement, feminism, and post-structuralism within sociology. The power imbalance between children and adults, along with the constraints imposed on children, are key factors in the relevant debates and justifications. In the book *A sense of Inequality*, Bottero's (2019) explored individuals' understanding and interpretations of everyday inequality, covering aspects like race, gender, and class, as well as how individuals' senses of inequality are shaped by moral values and principles of justice.

By employing Bottero's arguments, the inequality between children and adults is used to conceptualise LBC's senses of inequality in their everyday social lives with their peers. As was also argued in literature review chapter (Chapter 2), adults play a significant role in LBC's peer relationships. Thus, I argue that the social inequality between children and adults might influence LBC's relational agency in peer relationships and relational constraints imposed by others, which are intertwined with LBC's understanding or interpretations of social inequality within peer interactions. Meanwhile, in line with what Bottero (2019) argued

when incorporating social norms in Chinese society, I also argue that LBC's sense of inequality in peer relationships might also be molded by the moral values and principles of justice that hold themselves or that are imposed on them by others, including peers and adults.

Furthermore, it is worthwhile to explore LBC's responses to these imposed moral values or principles of justice, as I regard these as their negotiation of social normativity and justification of their related social behaviours in peer relationships. The theoretical evidence regarding LBC's competence or ability to justify themselves and negotiate social normativity will be detailed in section 3.3 below.

3.2.6 Summary

The incorporation of essential sociological theories plays a crucial role in conceptualising all three elements of the conceptual framework (as illustrated in Diagram 3.2 above). It also serves to inform the methodology and establish connections with the assumptions outlined in the literature review. Despite the existence of contradictions within the debates surrounding specific theories and among theories originating from different paradigms, the key aspects employed for conceptualising the framework, along with the justifications for applying these concepts in this research, have been comprehensively addressed. This takes into account the embedded research context that has been discussed previously.

3.3 Children's ability to negotiate social normativity and justify themselves in social relationships

In this section, I will further conceptualise children's ability in negotiating social normativity and justifying themselves within social relationships. This will be achieved by drawing on some new empirical studies in sociology in combination with the essential theories from sociology that have been addressed previously. I regard children's ability in negotiating social normativity and justifying themselves or their related social behaviours as a form of their relational agency in response to the relational constraints imposed by others. This pertains to the third research question regarding how Chinese LBC respond to these imposed constraints. I assume that LBC are capable of negotiating norms and justifying

themselves within the constraints imposed by Chinese adult, which are embedded with Confucian norms, when interacting with peers in family and school settings. Specifically, when their individual interests clash with collective interests, it is worthwhile to explore how they negotiate the norms that advocate collective interests and justify themselves as individuals among their peers.

3.3.1 Incorporating feminism approaches and discussion on voiced and silenced agency to conceptualise children's negotiation and justification

Children and young people have been found to be able to voice themselves in their social relationships with others by justifying their social behaviours (Sweeting and Seaman, 2005). When their social behaviours are seen as contrary to certain social norms, they have proven to be competent in justifying their own norms in social interactions. This is evident in Elley's (2011) empirical study on young women's gendered and classed heterosexual practices in relation to their educational aspirations and social networks. Middle-class young women tend to justify their non-sexual activities as one of their social norms, as they are educated to prioritise academic goals in life (Elley, 2011). As a result, they avoid sexual activity at a young age. Conversely, Allen's (2003) study shows that young women can justify their sexual desire, demonstrating their resistance to being labelled as 'sluts'. Allen (2003) also argues that this is young women's social construction of what is normative in heterosexual activity, which, I argue, aligns with the negotiation process in social contract theory as mentioned in section 3.2.1. Also, I think that this construction of normativity is in line with the idea of rejecting universal truth (in section 3.2.4) in post-structuralism, when considering the label 'sluts' as a socially constructed norm.

Drawing on these two seemingly opposing ways of justifying their practices in gendered and classed heterosexual activities, young people can either comply with the class stratification reflected in their sexual practices or justify the normativity of their sexual practices themselves. Evidently, I argue that both demonstrate young people's competence in negotiating what they consider acceptable in terms of social norms. This is applicable in conceptualising LBC's negotiation of normativity and their ability to justify themselves in peer relationships involving Chinese social norms imposed by others, even though all the peer interactions in this research are non-sexual. A relational approach

allows these norms to be regarded as relational constraints to LBC's relational agency. Thus, children's negotiation of normativity and their ways to justifying their related social behaviours demonstrates part of their relational agency.

Drawing on feminism theories used in section 3.2.3, in combination with relevant discussions on children's voiced and silenced competence in section 3.1.3, children, young people, and women are often conceptualised as subordinate groups in society compared to other groups with more power. I think that one common trait among these subordinate groups is the desire to subvert certain social constraints. So, I argue that if they, including children, do not yet have the power to break these constraints, at least justifying themselves to be heard by others can also be considered as a type of their relational agency. Compared to being completely silent as argued (Spyrou, 2016), the concept of negotiation and justification is somewhere in between, being voiced but perhaps not so participative agency. In this sense, I think children and youth can justify themselves without taking any actions, which I consider in this research, as their demonstration of agency.

3.3.2 Children's negotiation and justification stemmed from family studies

Children's negotiation of normativity in family studies is also significant. Davies (2014) posits that one of the power origins of discursive representation or construction lies within the family. The family legitimises existing power relationships and structures by formulating normativity, making any social behaviours outside the normal realm acceptable (Davies, 2014). This is relevant to my research, as family is one of the social settings under consideration. When referring to the key to social contract theory, which emphasises a negotiation process (in section 3.2.1), it is worth exploring how LBC's negotiate family norms when interacting with peers within the family. In addition, I assume that children and youth are capable of constructing what is acceptable in family norms and justifying themselves to gain attention from adults during peer interactions in the family. This assumption also pertains to the third research question regarding how Chinese LBC respond to constraints imposed by others, including family members, if we view family norms as constraints on their relational agency. I think that family members, including peers and adults who

share similar social normativity and are involved in LBC's peer interactions within the family, may shape such relational constraints.

Meanwhile, I consider LBC's negotiation involving peers in family as their competence or agency to balance power disparity among themselves, their peers and adults, and to mitigate binary opposition between children and adults, as argued in section 3.2.5 above.

Children's constructions of family boundaries or family borders in relation to who constitute their families is also evident in other empirical studies (Bancroft et al., 2005; Sweeting and Seaman, 2005; Hill, 2005; Kutsar and Darmody, 2014).

This relates to the discussion on children's social competence in section 3.1.3 above, where I argued that they can create or use certain criteria when interacting with peers. I regard these criteria as the boundaries or borders that children establish when forming their social circles that involve their peers. These boundaries, borders, and criteria help configurate relationship circles, reflecting children's construction of personal boundaries in their social interactions with peers in the family.

Therefore, I think that children's ability to create and negotiate personal boundaries both within and outside the family (Hill, 2005) supports the assumption that children's negotiation within the family represents their construction of agency. I think this concept is also applicable in other social contexts, such as in schools, and aligns with the discussion on children's relational agency addressed in section 3.1 above. I also argue that precisely because children have little or no power or right to voice themselves in the face of relational constraints, they must construct their own social norms—regarded as their criteria or boundaries—and justify them in certain social circumstances.

3.3.3 Children's negotiation and construction of social normativity in power disparities

In Goodwin and Kyratzis's (2007) empirical study, it is clear that children are competent in negotiating and co-constructing social and moral orders among their peers, including siblings. As argued, children are active agents in the construction of their social behaviours and identities, which they value as a means to build and subvert hierarchies in peer interactions (Goodwin and Kyratzis, 2007). This relates to the view that children's negotiation of social

norms can be considered a type of their relational agency. These orders were also negotiated by a group of girls with multi-ethnic backgrounds in a Swedish elementary school to categorise their friends as either bad or good friends (Evaldsson, 2007). I argue that social exclusion was then justified, demonstrating children's social competence by indicating unacceptable social behaviours and power imbalances among peers (Evaldsson, 2007). I regard the process of children's peer inclusion and exclusion as a type of children's agency in constructing, justifying, and negotiating their social norms or orders with peers within a specific social context.

Children's construction of social norms with peers aligns with my assumption in section 3.1 about understanding criteria-making and -using as a form of children's relational agency. However, I think that subverting pre-existing social norms is not the only choice for children to construct their norms through negotiation and justification. Using existing authoritative criteria to create a hierarchy is identified by me as part of children's agency in negotiating roles among peers. Also, as Griswold (2007) argued, when the authoritative position of dominant peers remains, children can use it to establish internal orders within the peer group (Griswold, 2007). In the context of LBC and their family, I argue that these orders might be age-based hierarchies within the family among LBC and their siblings or cousins. In Chinese filial piety, respect for seniors is a fundamental aspect of family discipline (McCarthy et al., 2017). Additionally, I think that these orders may be related to gender issues, such as the dominant childrearing rule preferring boys over girls, often carried out by LBC's grandparents (Dai, 2001; Hu, 2016; Huang and Gong, 2022). Furthermore, I assume that LBC might use the authoritative positions of adults and the norms advocated by them to construct new social norms that are shared within the peer group.

Similar evidence can be found in research on intra-generational relationships that involve children's siblings and cousins within either an immediate family or an extended family. Davies (2014) suggests that children and young people's identities are constructed in relation to the similarities and differences when compared with their siblings, and power also exists within this context. In alignment with the arguments regarding post-structuralism presented earlier in

this chapter, I argue that adults' discourse authority (van Dijk, 2008) might be the form of power that Davies refers to. This also ties in with Foucault's (1982) discussion on power and resistance, where children's negotiation of normativity and their act of justification can be framed as a form of resistance. This resistance, I argue, is aimed at preventing them from succumbing to adults' authority and power, enabling children to assert their own agency and shape the social norms and peer interactions within their family environments.

The idea of gaining autonomy plays a crucial role in the relevant assumptions derived from social movement theory as mentioned in section 3.2.3 above. Meanwhile, within the framework of post-structuralism, van Dijk (2008) also argues that discourse authority is legitimised yet can be resisted, thereby demonstrating the power dynamics involved in the construction of knowledge and the resistance against it. In line with both of these arguments, I assume that LBC are competent enough to gain autonomy in discourse authority, despite adults typically being regarded as the dominant figures in such contexts. This manifestation of children's negotiation and justification of social normativity reflects their ability to assert themselves. Children's resistance towards discourse authority can take shape within their peer relationships, even while the influence of adults persists continuously.

Although gaining discourse autonomy is not completely synonymous with subverting power constraints, I would argue that it can be considered as a type of relational agency. It might also help mitigate the binary opposition between the passive and active parties within discourse authority mechanisms (van Dijk, 2008), namely children and adults. Meanwhile, I think that the acquisition of discourse autonomy might commence with a rejection of the notion of universal truth. Since children are often seen as passive recipients of adults' discourse authority, this rejection to adults' discourse authority can also be interpreted as an awareness of the inequality imposed on them. Such awareness further motivates their engagement in negotiating social norms and justifying related social behaviours.

3.3.4 Inequality and justification in relation to relational constraints

Meanwhile, children's negotiation is dependent on the individuals with whom they socialise (Sweeting and Seaman, 2005) within social contexts that involve

both their agency and the constraints imposed on them. When Bottero (2020) discusses a sense of inequality, it is argued that disadvantaged or subordinate groups can recognise their disadvantages and negotiate their positions with those who consider their privilege as the norm. Manning (2013) also argues that young people are active social agents when negotiating their multiple identities and engaging themselves in politics. As a result, children and young people develop various ways to actively participate in political activities (Manning, 2013; Wyness, 2018). Evidently, children and young people can actively involve themselves in the negotiation of social positions and normativity when faced within certain constraints.

These manifestation of negotiation and resistance all have indicate that children and young people possess strong relational agency (Esser, 2016) in response to constraints arising from social structures or, more specifically, from the constraints imposed by the people around them when taking a relational approach into account. Thus, I assume that a sense of inequality helps shape LBC's relational agency, which is also evident in their resistance to certain constraints imposed by others and constitutes their ability to negotiate normativity and justify themselves.

I also consider the relational constraints imposed by others on LBC as a demonstration of social normativity that other people uphold in their social relationships with LBC. I argue that in peer interactions, these constraints and children's responses to them involve different or even contradictory understandings of social norms. Consequently, it is worthwhile to explore LBC's ability to negotiate norms and justify themselves through peer interactions, especially when they are seen as the bearers of such imposed norms, where the awareness of inequality emerges as one of the incentives for their negotiation.

3.3.5 Summary

In summary, I argued that children's negotiation and justification can take the form of being voiced, yet this does not always result in active participation. They are able to express their viewpoints by negotiating normativity and/or justifying their actions within social relationships where power dynamics or discourse authority exist. However, such negotiation or justification does not invariably

function as a means for them to subvert power constraints. Instead, it frequently serves to mitigate the binary opposition between those who hold the power to impose normativity and those who are subjected to it. Moreover, I also argue that a sense of inequality emerges through children's negotiation and justification of normativity, presenting itself as a type of relational agency in response to the relational constraints.

3.4 Debates in children's geographies and cross-cultural perspective

Researchers in children's geographies emphasise geographical places that shape diverse childhoods (Matthews and Limb, 1999; Holloway and Valentine, 2000c; Holloway, 2014). This field encompasses three main dimensions which include: 1) employing global perspectives to conduct research on childhoods as they are manifested in different social contexts; 2) exploring children's everyday spaces like family, school, or community to study childhoods; 3) the formation of children's ideology, identity, bodies, or minds that are associated with these spaces (Aitken, 2005; Mayall, 2013). In fact, my research aligns with these three dimensions. Researching LBC in China offers a perspective for related explorations of cultural issues within the Chinese context. Moreover, I specifically focus on LBC's peer interactions in family and school, which are two spaces where they spend a significant amount of time with their peers. Children's agency not only indicate but also reflects their ideological construction of agency, thereby manifesting their subjective childhoods.

My conceptualisation and contextualisation of their agency have strong connections with the Chinese context and LBC's daily living spaces. A cross-cultural perspective (Liamputtong, 2010) is essential as it provides explanations regarding the Chinese context and the embedded social norms that impact LBC's social construction of agency. This perspective is also applicable when delving into LBC's social practice of agency within family and school contexts, as it relates to using a geographical lens to research childhood. Ultimately, cross-cultural perspectives contribute to informing my methodology, specifically influencing my ontological stance as a constructivist, and my epistemological position as an interpretivist, my data analysis methods, my ethical considerations, and my positionality. Additionally, it helps eliminate cultural barriers for non-Chinese readers in understanding my research. For Chinese

readers, the concept of child agency offers a relatively novel perspective for researching LBC and other Chinese children. When utilising theories in post-structuralism, as mentioned in section 3.2.4 above, emphasis is placed on discourse in different contexts to help identify power and deconstruct power within knowledge. Thus, using a cross-cultural perspective helps in identifying power constraints embedded in LBC's social discourses.

It has been argued that researchers in children's geographies should consider the growing importance of children's identities and forms of agency, along with the broader impact of related work in this field (Jeffrey, 2010; Holloway, 2014). From my perspective, when applying geographical lens to study childhoods, the impact can be bidirectional. Also, as argued, children's geographies foster mutual understanding between researchers or societies of the Majority World and the Minority World to enhance childhood studies on a border scale (Mayall, 2013). Even though contexts may vary, a cross-cultural approach can help address similar problems that are identified or resolved within different contexts. A cross-cultural perspective also increases the translational impact of this research on LBC studies in other social contexts apart from the Chinese context, as being left behind is a global phenomenon. The emerging trend of stigmatising Chinese LBC also affects LBC research in other social contexts (Reyes, 2007; Cortes, 2015; Vanore et al., 2015; Royuela et al., 2019). Such a translational understanding of LBC's agency can be adopted to counteract the stereotyping of LBC in other countries.

Chapter 4 Methodology

In this chapter, I will outline the methodological framework that guides my research. It is structured in a way to offer a clear and comprehensive understanding of the study design. I will start by restating my ontological and epistemological stances. These stances underpin my research approach and inform how I develop my research. Then, I will explain how the three research questions are integrated with other relevant parts of my thesis. I will also show how these questions are operationalised through interview prompts that I derive from the three elements in the conceptual framework discussed in Chapter 3 above. Below, I will present the operational definitions of peers and LBC as well. After that, I will discuss my sampling strategy, the process of participant recruitment, and the methods I used for data collection and analysis at different stages of the research. I will also address ethical considerations in detail, covering those that arise during and after the fieldwork. In addition, I will reflect on the ethics of my departure from the research site. Finally, I will state my positionality and engage in reflexivity to critically demonstrate how my role as a researcher had shaped the research process and findings I have obtained.

4.1 Ontological and epistemological stances

As mentioned in Chapter 3 above, my ontological position is that of a social constructivist. I view LBC's reality as constructed through their social interactions (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) with peers with Chinese cultural norms embedded. When discussing how to conduct research, I also view their reality as constructed through their interactions with me as a researcher (how I position myself and navigate the participant-researcher relationship will be discussed in section 4.10 below). Also, as addressed above, my epistemological stance is an interpretivist, as I seek to understand knowledge as shaped by individuals' (in this research, LBC's) perspectives and their lived experiences (Schutz, 1967). A constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology lead me to qualitative methods, like interviews (Creswell and Poth, 2016), that allow for in-depth exploration of child participants' perspectives.

In fact, the formation of Chapter 6 on relational constraints was led by my participants themselves, as they mentioned adults related to their peer

relationships and their interference very often during fieldwork. It later formulated the analysis of multiple social norms in Chapter 6. The formation of Chapter 6 further guided the direction of Chapter 7 focusing on children's normativity negotiation and their related justifications when socialising with peers. These two chapters, generated from data analysis and constituting a significant portion of the three empirical chapters, were fundamentally built on the trust and participant-researcher relationship between the child participants involved in this research and me as a researcher and an adult, as well as my dedicated focus on listening to their voiced and unvoiced agency (or tangible and intangible agency). Other related justifications will also be discussed in section 4.7 below, focusing on explaining specific data collection and data analysis methods.

Meanwhile, the incorporation of debates on children's geographies and cross-cultural perspectives, as discussed in section 3.4 of Chapter 3, provides theoretical support for my insider-outsider researcher positionality (addressed in section 4.10 below). This positionality also aligns with my ontological and epistemological stances. As I position myself as an outsider to these theories and concepts utilised in this research, but a cultural insider to the Chinese culture and Chinese society where LBC's agency taken place. Thus, my in-depth exploration of LBC's perspectives, grounded in my constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, also involves the following: 1) applying relevant theories and concepts from the Minority World (as discussed in Chapter 3 on the theoretical framework) when viewing myself as an outsider to them; and 2) explaining Chinese culture and LBC's practices of agency in peer relationships from their perspectives as a cultural insider to the context of LBC's agency practices.

4.2 Research questions

To reiterate, the three research questions are:

- 1) How do Chinese LBC enact relational agency in their peer interactions?
- 2) What relational constraints are imposed by others, including peers and adults, in the context of Chinese LBC's relational agency in peer relationships?
- 3) How do Chinese LBC response to these constraints?

4.3 Connecting three research questions with other relevant sections

Diagram 4.3 below shows how I link these components: key points from literature review in Chapter 2, related assumptions from both Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, the three research questions, related theories and/or concepts from Chapter 3, and key arguments that will be presented in the three empirical chapters (Chapter 5, 6 and 7). The diagram is navigated by the three research questions (in black matrices in Diagram 4.3). Once these three research questions were displayed on the diagram, other relevant parts then came into play. The other relevant parts within the thesis are each connected to the three research questions, with key points listed on the diagram. By clarifying the connection between the research questions and the other parts, I can make clear the overall structure and flow of the thesis.

4.4 Conceptual and operational definitions of children's agency, constraints, responses to the constraints, LBC, and peers

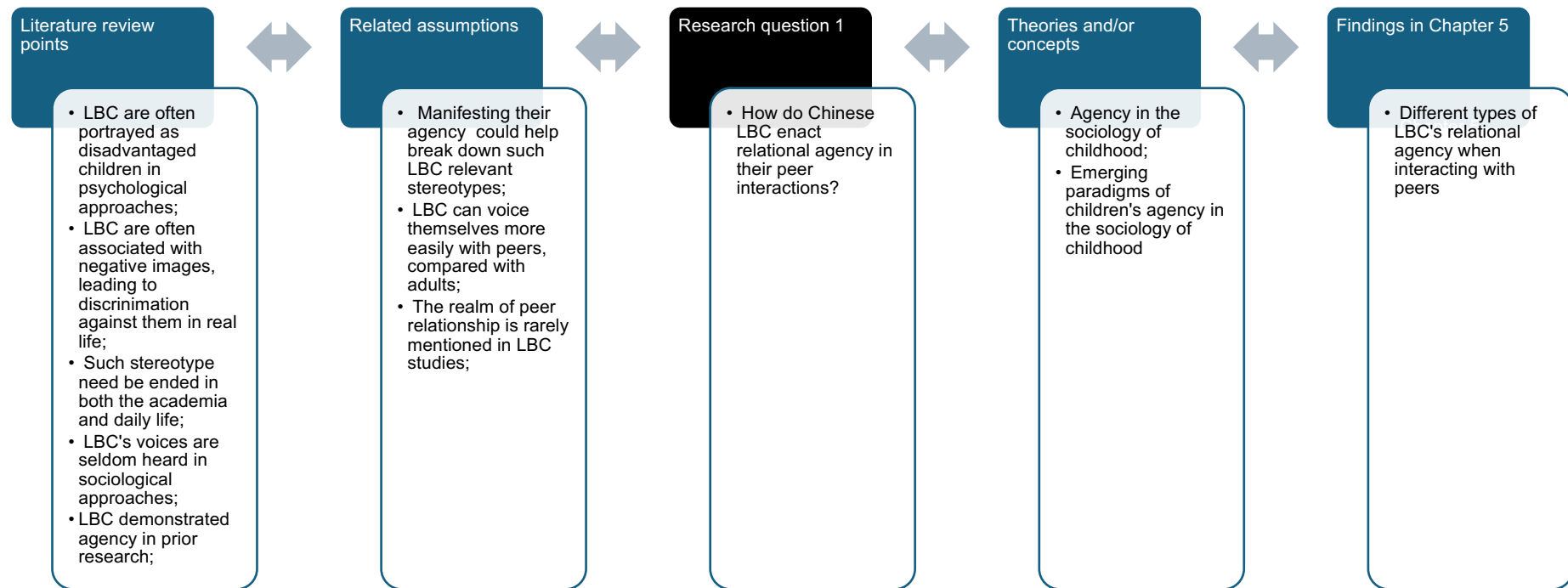
The conceptual definitions of children's agency, constraints, responses to the constraints, LBC, and peers were utilised to generate and refine interview prompts for data collection. Thus, this section focuses on my approaches to develop interview prompts based on the conceptual framework introduced in Chapter 3 and the conceptual definitions of LBC and peers from Chapter 2. This section will also be associated with section 4.5 below.

After the introduction of my conceptual framework (in Chapter 3), I argue that agency and constraint are two academic concepts that are often discussed together within academia. Thus, this led me to address the operational definitions of both agency and constraint together. Also, considering my participants are children who may not be able to understand conceptual definitions of agency and constraints, I operationally embedded relevant concepts by using plain words that they can understand in the interview prompts or direct questions of online instant messaging.

Details will be disclosed in the below section on converting these conceptual definitions into correlated operational definitions through interview prompts in relation to research questions.

4.4.1 The operational definitions of agency, constraints and responses to constraints

Diagram 4.3 Connecting 3 research questions with other relevant parts of the thesis



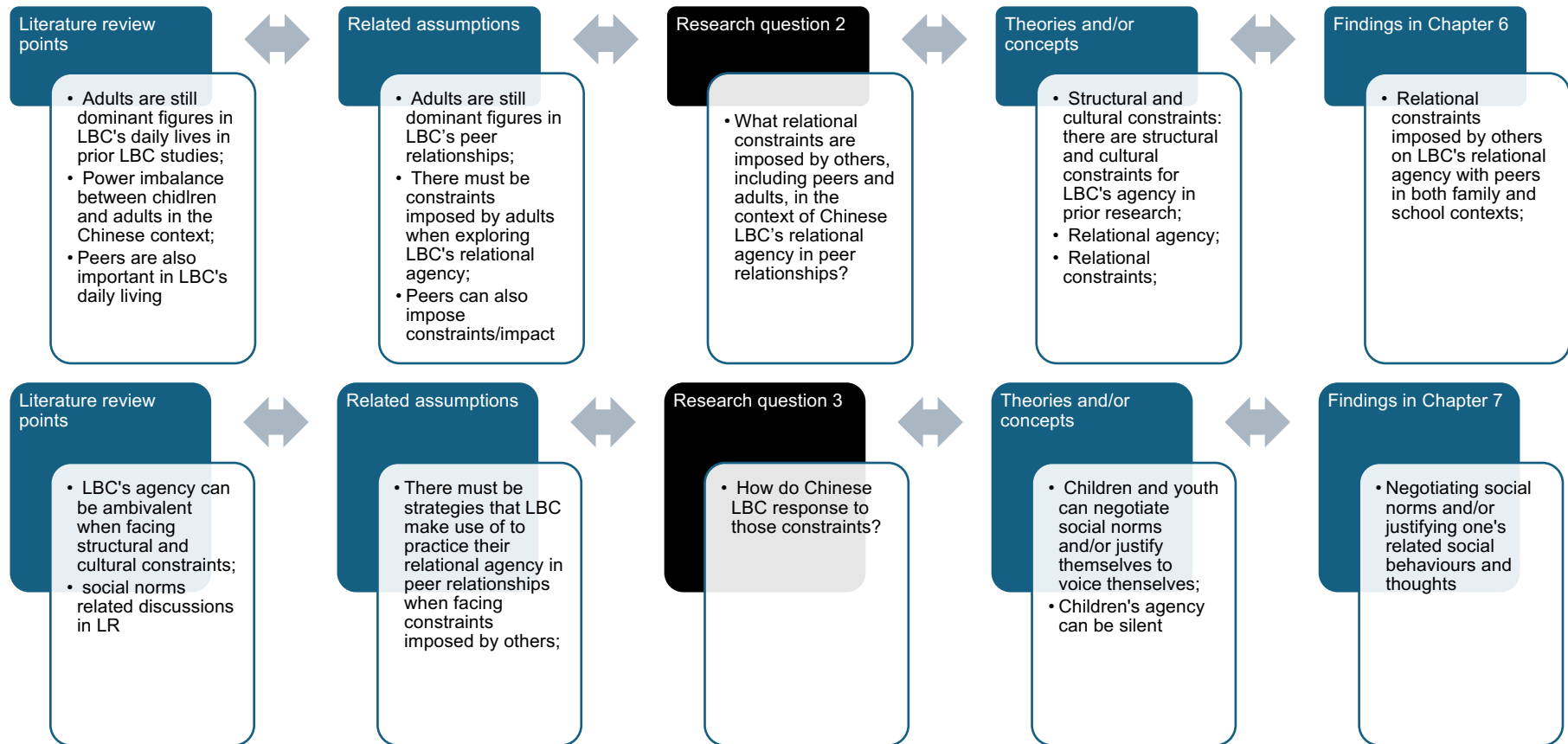


Diagram 4.4.2 illustrates how I convert the aforementioned conceptual framework from Chapter 3 into operational definitions in connection with the three research questions. Diagram 4.4.2 is also related to Diagram 3.1 in Chapter 3. The four grey boxes shown on the diagram constitute the operational definitions of relational agency, constraints and children's responses to the constraints. I will further discuss these in the paragraphs that follow.

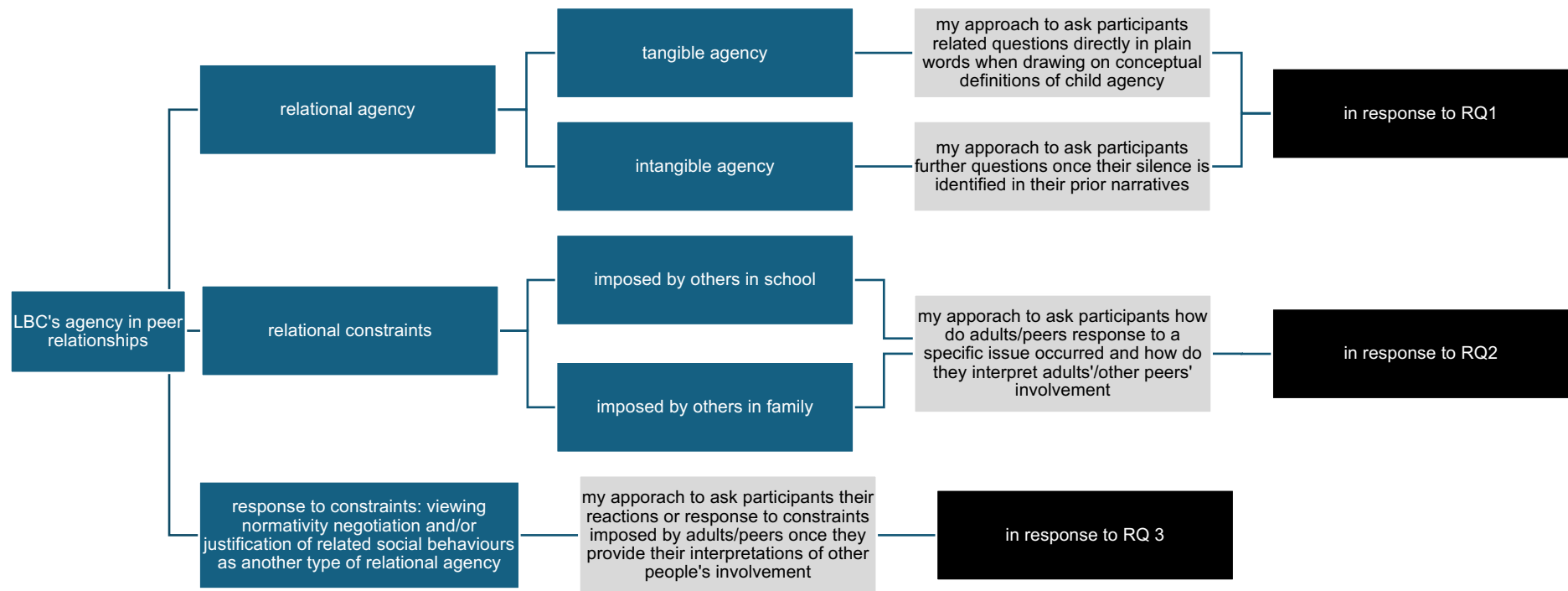
My approach to asking participants related questions directly in plain words when drawing on conceptual definitions of child agency

To enable my participants to provide answers that could be analysed in response to the first research question, I began by asking them about their daily interactions with peers in their family and school environments, deliberately avoiding the use of agency as an academic term. Also, I translated agency into interview prompts that can be easily understood according to their comprehension capacity related to age and grade. For example, I asked them 1) How do you get along with your peers in school/family? 2) Is there anything interesting/bad happened between you and your peers today?

Moreover, in line with the conceptual framework of this research, tangible agency is understood as: 1) children's reactions of actively voicing themselves among peer groups and/or adults in family and school, in a distinct way; 2) their social competence in identifying and dealing with different types of peers; 3) their own narrations regarding peer interactions. Furthermore, participants' ways of voicing themselves in this research can be: 1) telling teachers about unfair treatment encountered when socialising with peers in school to seek teachers' help; 2) telling parents or surrogate parents about unfair treatments encountered when their socialisation with peers in family is impacted by parents or surrogate parents. The commonality of their voices that can be recognised as agency is their sense of inequality and related reactions to it. When asking how they identify and/or deal with different types of peers, relevant prompts include: 1) What type of peers you do like/dislike and why? 2) How do you differentiate them? 3) What are your criteria when picking a friend?

Also, participants' narratives regarding peer relationships are an operational definition linked with the concept of relational agency. As children might have

Diagram 4.4.2 Operating the conceptual framework in data collection in response to research questions



their different ways of constructing agency in peer relationships, so no fixed prompts were used to address this part. However, from data collected, it turned out that children's silenced agency, their narratives of other people's involvement in their peer relationships, and their responses or reactions to the relational constraints that were imposed by others can be applied to construct their agency using the conceptual framework.

These interview prompts were only employed to initiate one-on-one conversations with my participants. Some follow-up questions were tailored according to their specific stories. The follow-up questions helped to gain more details regarding their specific stories of daily encounters in family and school. These follow-up questions will be seen in the extracts included in the upcoming three empirical chapters (Chapter 5, 6, and 7). Thus, there is no need to explain one by one here. However, the commonality of these follow-up questions is asking participants how they react to certain social circumstances that they brought up during data collection. So, according to their reactions, their relational agency and related relational constraints can be identified and analysed based on the conceptual framework.

My approach to asking participants further questions once their silence is identified in their prior narratives

Intangible agency is considered to be children's silenced agency, as illustrated in Diagram 4.4.2 above. In line with the arguments related to silent agency, which are mainly addressed in section 3.1.3 of Chapter 3, I think that children's intangible agency might also stem from participants' detailed narrations. Moreover, their intangible agency can be associated with the constraints imposed by others.

Consequently, the operational definition of their silenced agency is the reasons they have for choosing not to lodge complaints in family or school. Thus, based on their responses to the follow-up questions regarding their reactions to certain social encounters, those who refrain from making complaints can be identified. Therefore, I asked them (once again during one-on-one conversations) about why they do not tell adults about their unpleasant social encounters with peers and about the obstacles they face when voicing themselves in front of adults in family and school. The purpose of asking such relevant questions is to uncover

details of their life stories and to identify the commonalities of their agency by using the conceptual framework. Their narrations regarding the reasons for remaining silent and their interpretations of the obstacles that lead to silence will also be utilised to provide explanations addressing Chinese culture and context. Only through this approach can we understand how LBC construct their relational agency in their own narrations and from their own perspectives within the Chinese context.

My approach to asking participants how adults/peers respond to a specific issue occurred and how they interpret adults'/peers' involvement

In fact, this part is driven by participants rather than being designed from the start. This is also the reason why the theoretical framework and research questions have been refined later. This also fully demonstrates that the development of this research and the eventual formation of the thesis largely relied on LBC's agency, which is also one of the ways to empower LBC in this research.

In line with my assumption of relational constraints discussed in the theoretical framework chapter (Chapter 3), the operational definition of relational constraints is understood as other people's (including peers and adults') involvement in children's peer relationships. So, the focus during data collection is on children's understanding of other people's involvement in their peer relationships. In addition, not just children's silences and reasons for being silent, their multiple ways of distinctly voicing themselves are also included to address the relational constraints imposed by others.

Below are some examples of interview prompts addressing other people's involvements in LBC's peer relationships: 1) What are the possible reasons for being treated differently by adults around you compared to how they treat your peers? 2) What do other people (could be adults and/or other peers) do when you interact with the specific peer that you mentioned earlier? 3) What type of impact do other people have on the interactions between you and your peers?

My approach to asking about participants their reactions or responses to relational constraints imposed by adults/peers once they responded to others' involvement

Based on participants' narratives and their understanding of relational constraints imposed by others, this part came into shape. Identifying how children respond to certain constraints imposed by others is aimed at answering the third research question. Directly asking them about their reactions or responses to these constraints, which they themselves have previously identified, can facilitate relevant discussions and enable in-depth analysis.

After exploring the constraints that are imposed by others, I assume that children must have certain reactions or responses to the imposed constraints. When processing data analysis, it turned out that the commonality of children's reactions or responses to the constraints can be linked with relevant literature regarding children and young people's normativity negotiation and justification of related social behaviours demonstrated in section 3.3 of Chapter 3.

In line with the conceptual definition of normativity negotiation and self-justification, I think that some of my participants' reactions or responses might be challenges they face regarding certain traditional norms that are widely accepted in family and/or school settings. Identifying such norms also helps provide evidence for children's normativity negotiation and justification of related social behaviours as a type of their agency facing relational constraints.

Hence, follow-up interview prompts were generated regarding their responses to the constraints. The prompts include: 1) What is your opinion on the rationality of the issue that you have mentioned earlier involving your peers? 2) What will you advocate in peer interactions if you are the people who have a say? 3) When facing certain constraints, what are your strategies to breach them if you have peer support? 4) What are your opinions regarding what is widely accepted by peers, what is not?

4.4.2 Conceptual and operational definitions of LBC

The use of conceptual definition of LBC in this thesis

The conceptual definition of LBC was discussed in section 2.1, Chapter 2.

Based on these different categorisations of LBC, I think whether LBC are from

families with international migrant parents or internal migrant parents, they both live apart from their parents. The only difference is that those whose parents migrate internationally might have even less time to spend with their parents, compared with those whose parents migrate internally within China (Chang, et al., 2019). So, I included all the categories of LBC in my research, which were distinguished in the LBC literature in section 2.1, Chapter 2.

As mentioned in section 2.1 of Chapter 2, the age range of LBC remains a subject of debate. However, they are commonly defined as children of migrant parents who are under eighteen and spend less than three months per year with their parents. Accordingly, I included all types of LBC who are under eighteen and spend less than three months annually with their migrant parents. In section 4.6 below, I will provide details of my purposive sampling, demonstrating how the conceptual definition of LBC aligns with the criteria for purposive sampling.

Meanwhile, as mentioned in the literature review regarding psychological approaches in prior LBC studies, LBC are often associated with negative images. Stereotypes regarding LBC emerged. One of the aims of this research is to de-stereotype LBC by using child agency-related concepts and theories to explore LBC's agency. However, although LBC is still an academic term that is widely used and accepted within the academia, there are potential ethical issues that can occur when utilising the term to differentiate LBC from other children. Nevertheless, the conceptual definition of LBC is used in this thesis merely to facilitate the clear identification of the participants.

The operational definition of LBC

This operational definition is closely related to sampling participants and the ethics of using the term LBC in this research. Considering the different types of LBC mentioned above in the conceptual definition of LBC, participants in rural primary and secondary schools were sampled. Details of the participants will be included in section 4.6 below. Although the conceptual definition of LBC was employed as a reference to assist in recruiting participants during data collection, the term LBC was not used in any of the written materials sent out to participants, parents, and gatekeepers. I consider this as an ethical conduct during data collection. The reasons for not using the term LBC in front of LBC

will be disclosed in the following paragraph. Instead, descriptions of their living conditions with biological parents were added to all the written materials for recruiting participants, and these will be enclosed as appendices at the end of this thesis. However, the term LBC was used to reduce ambiguity in verbal communications when inviting and informing parents and gatekeepers in the absence of the participants.

When considering the ethics of using the term LBC, it is worth mentioning Murphy's (2022) research. Murphy (2022) focused on LBC's own construction of the meaning of being left behind. It was noted that children's interpretations of being left behind stem from their own needs and desires, including the relevant emotions or feelings associated with their understanding of being left behind and their observation of living conditions in relation to parental migration. Some of them also rejected the label of being left behind, demonstrating their close relationships with both migrant parents and grandparents (Murphy, 2022). According to their viewpoints, physically living apart from biological parents does not imply being abandoned emotionally. Hence, I argue that the rejection of being labelled as LBC and their justification of maintaining a sound relationship with their parents can be regarded as manifestations of their agency. In this research, I also assumed that LBC possess agency in their daily lives, which extends beyond the limitations of the LBC label.

Also, during my data collection, I opted not to use the term LBC to refer to my participants. I simply addressed them by their names when communicating with them; however, only pseudonyms were used in this thesis. They were informed about the use of pseudonyms prior to any data collection. In fact, my participants mentioned the term LBC on a few occasions during our interviews, which were conducted in Chinese. It seemed that they were quite at ease when mentioning it to me. Also, the term itself did not impede the demonstration of their diverse constructions of relational agency with peers following parental migration through their vivid life stories. Moreover, literally in Chinese, LBC is translated as *liushou* children (Murphy, 2022; Guo and Spyrou, 2024), which refers to a living condition of staying behind and taking on responsibilities that cannot be handled by their migrant parents who are absent. It does not imply being left alone or abandoned. To some extent, the Chinese definition itself in

has no negative connotation. Instead, it indicates LBC's agency in the Chinese context. Some of them share certain family responsibilities with their migrant parents, such as taking care of their grandparents and younger siblings and/or cousins (Xiao, 2015b).

However, associating LBC with negative images has already become a stereotype (Huang and Zou, 2023). The trend of stigmatising LBC in daily life is also prevalent in Chinese society (Hung et al., 2023). Meanwhile, during the data collection for this research, the term LBC was not used operationally; however, it was still employed by some gatekeepers and parents. For the sake of quickly identifying the research subject, the conceptual definition of LBC is utilised in this thesis for the dissemination of research results. Moreover, the term LBC has not yet outdated within academia.

Overall, by integrating all the conceptual definitions of LBC, this research addressed LBC in an ethical manner throughout the processes of sampling, data collection, analysis, and results dissemination.

4.4.3 Conceptual and operational definitions of peers

The conceptual definitions of peers in childhood studies

As addressed in section 2.5.1 of Chapter 2, children's peers can be understood as a group of people with whom children can exercise their agency within different social contexts on a routine basis. Meanwhile, as I have illustrated and argued in the literature review (Chapter 2), adults and their dominant roles in children's lives have an impact on children's interactions with peers. It is also evident that Chinese parents can intervene children's peer interactions and regulate children's friend selection (Zhu, 2020a) to ensure healthy social environment for children.

Since adult's power and authority are taken into account when exploring children's agency in peer relationships, I argue that peers can be considered as children who are under the same or similar adult authority or power constraint as LBC in this research. This also aligns with my assumptions regarding relational constraints, which were discussed in the theoretical framework chapter (Chapter 3), given that constraints represent adults' impact on children and the relevant construction of meanings.

In summary, I then conceptualise the peers of LBC as follows: 1) people with whom LBC can practice their agency within the Chinese social context; 2) people who can influence LBC's relational agency through their interactions with each other; and 3) people who are under similar social constraints imposed by adults on LBC. Thus, based on these conceptual definitions of peers, operationally, LBC's living conditions involving peers should be taken into consideration.

The operational definition of peers

As mentioned in the literature review chapter (Chapter 2), schools' boarding arrangements, or the arrangements of boarding schools, as well as families' childrearing plans after parental migration, have reshaped LBC's interpersonal relationships, including peer relationships in both school and family contexts. Some LBC's family structures are also diverse, and many may from remarried families. Thus, I recognise LBC's peers in school as: 1) their schoolmates, 2) classmates and 3) their friends, and 4) acquaintances. And I recognise LBC's 5) siblings, 6) half-siblings, 7) stepsiblings, and 8) cousins as their peers in their left behind families.

These operational definitions of peers were also included in the information sheet in the appendices to help participants initiate peer-related topics. Even though during the data collection, they exercised their agency in picking a peer-related topic based on diverse peer categories made by me as a researcher, I did not limit the topics that they could talk about during interviews regarding peers. In fact, I positioned myself as a listener to my participants as I gave them full attention regarding the issues that they were interested in or what they brought up about peers in both school and family contexts. Thus, categorising peers for my participants did not limit their agency in this research.

4.5 Interview prompts

Interview prompts were addressed in section 4.4 above, in combination with the operational definitions of relational agency, constraints, and reactions to constraints. Table 4.5 below gathers all the prompts, along with their correlated operational and conceptual definitions, and research questions. Table 4.5 below is also linked with Diagram 4.4.2 above.

Table 4.5 Interview prompts

Related research questions	Correlated conceptual definitions	Correlated operational definitions	Related interview prompts
Research question 1: How do Chinese LBC enact relational agency in peer interactions?	Tangible agency	My approach to asking participants related questions drawing on conceptual definitions of child agency directly in plain words	1. How do you get along with your peers in family and/or in school? 2. Is there anything interesting happened between you and your peers? 3. Have you experienced unequal treatment when you socialise with your peers in school and/or family? 4. What kind of peers that you like or dislike, why? 5. How do you differentiate your peers? 6. What are your criteria for picking a friend?
	Intangible agency	My approach to asking participants further questions once their silence is identified in their prior narratives	1. What are the obstacles that prevent you from voicing yourself when interacting with peers? 2. What are the reasons for being silent?
Research questions 2: What are the relational constraints imposed by others, including peers and adults, in the context of Chinese LBC's relational agency in peer relationships?	Relational constraints that imposed by adults/peers in school/family	My approach to asking participants how adults/peers respond to a specific issue occurred and how they interpret adults'/ peers' involvement	1. What kind of impact do other people have on the interactions between you and your peers? 2. What do other people (could be adults and/or other peers) do when you interact with the specific peer that you mentioned? 3. What are the possible reasons of being treated differently by adults around you compared with how they treat your peers?
Research question 3: How do Chinese LBC react to these constraints in their peer interactions?	LBC's reactions to the constraints: viewing negotiation or justification as another type of agency	My approach to asking participants their responses to constraints imposed by adults/peers once they provided their interpretation of other's involvement	1. What is your opinion on the rationality of the issue that you have mentioned earlier involving your peers? 2. What will you advocate in peer interactions if you are the people who have a say? 3. When facing certain constraints, what are your strategies to breach them if you have peer support? 4. What are your opinions regarding what is widely accepted by peers, what is not?

Special note: peers could be your siblings, cousins, classmates, or friends, those you often meet up and spend time with.

Prompts were also customised as specific questions that were asked during interviews based on participants' different answers. These customised questions are not included in Table 4.5 below but are included in each extract utilised in Chapter 5, 6, and 7. In total, nearly one hundred customised questions were asked during interviews with my participants.

4.6 Sampling and participants

4.6.1 Purposive and convenient sampling: the rationale, participants recruitment process and outcomes

Regarding the age range of the participants involved in this research, I have included LBC aged from nine to sixteen. The Grade Eight Phenomenon¹⁰ (Caixin, 2014) priorly addressed in section 2.3 of Chapter 2 indicates the dynamics of LBC's peer social networks. To reiterate, under the impact of the Grade Eight Phenomenon, some LBC might choose to enter vocational high school in their second year of junior high school and giving up their academic pathway to higher education through academic senior high school. In this case, LBC aged fourteen to sixteen are facing graduation (graduate from primary or junior high school) or further education (in vocational high school or in academic senior high school) which might have an impact on the structures of their interpersonal relationships with peers in schools. They would either just graduated or entered and adapted to a new school environment which could have an impact on the construction of their peer relationships. Even though social interaction between LBC and their peers does not only exist in a school setting, LBC aged 11 to 16 would possibly experience the most dynamic interpersonal relationships with peers. The reason for expanding the age range of participants is my intention to see how LBC perceive peer interactions and practice agency with peers. LBC aged nine to eleven are the age groups where peer interactions are relatively stable. Meanwhile, LBC aged above nine are considered as children at medium and upper stages in Chinese primary school (Gu et al., 2017b), who are also not too little to express their sophisticated peer interactions and identify relational constraints. Thus, LBC aged from nine to sixteen were sampled as the participants.

¹⁰ Grade eight in Chinese educational system is the second year of junior high school. Pupils normally aged 14 if they attend middle schools at the age of 13 (Caixin, 2014).

Also, as addressed in section 2.4 of Chapter 2, LBC's interpersonal relationships have been reshaped after parental migration. But only their left-behind living conditions are included as the criteria for purposive sampling. Firstly, Chinese schools maintain records of LBC-related family backgrounds, making it more convenient to conduct sampling through schools than to directly contact families. Secondly, approaching schools facilitates gaining the trust of these families and the LBC themselves. Additionally, the purposive sampling, which incorporates their schooling experiences, also considers their family living conditions, reflecting an integration of both their peer interactions in family and school contexts.

The working principle of purposive sampling is to gain sufficient participants who meet certain criteria (Newman, 2019). Also, for the sake of convenient purposive sampling (Etikan, 2016) through schools, I consider LBC's schooling experience, which might be related to the Grade Eight Phenomenon, when screening participants based on their ages. The following are the criteria for purposive sampling that align with the above-mentioned definitions of LBC (in section 4.4.3): 1) LBC who are children and youth under eighteen years old; 2) they normally spend less than three months each year with their parents; 3) they live either in cities or rural areas, regardless of which parent migrates and where their parents migrate.

Four schools participated in this research: two primary schools (one located in a rural area and one in an urban area) and two junior high schools (also one rural and one urban). As outlined in section 2.1.1 of chapter 2, this study does not focus on a specific type of LBC. The LBC categorisation referenced earlier is not intended for sampling purposes, but rather to introduce the concept of LBC. The inclusion of both rural and urban schools aimed to explore how boarding arrangements influence LBC's peer interactions. Although LBC living in urban areas are generally less likely to board at school (Liu and Villa, 2020), my fieldwork revealed that some LBC in rural areas also return home daily. In retrospect, the findings suggest that this sampling design did not adequately reflect the influence of boarding arrangements on LBC's peer interactions within school settings. Furthermore, the selection of these schools was partly guided

by convenience sampling, which is not connected to the LBC categorisation discussed earlier.

In China, students who attend primary school are usually aged from 7 to 12, and those who attend middle school are typically aged from 13 to 15 (Gu et al., 2017b). However, since there was a longitudinal design (details will be disclosed in section 4.7.2) in this research, two of the participants were over 15 after they entered senior high school. Tracking their high school lives was also part of the research design. Nevertheless, considering the academic pressure that high school students normally experience in China (Gu et al., 2017b), I did not include a large number of them in my research.

I started from approaching 4 school principals and getting their permission first to conduct research remotely and in person. I then asked them to help me circulate the research information sheet in medium and upper grades of primary schools (from grade 3 to 6, normally children are aged from 9 to 12), and in every grade of junior high schools. After gaining certain attention from trusted people (school principals and *banzhuren*), I then approached parents as school had already informed parents about my research. After obtaining parental consents, I proceeded to gain participants' trust, consents and contact information. I approached 30 participants in total and their parents and teachers, however, only 16 participants stayed until data were saturated. With these 16 remaining participants, I generated a total of 34 extracts from the data sets for the purpose of data analysis and thesis writing. The details of how I extracted from the data sets will be discussed in section 4.7.3, which pertains to the process of data analysis.

4.6.2 Participants and related information

Participants and related information are presented in Table 4.7.2 (1) below. This table includes participants' basic information, living conditions, data collection methods and processes for each participant, the time span and duration of engagement with each participant, their corresponding extract labels, and the appearance of their extracts in each empirical chapter.

I only used the data sets that were assumed as effective and suitable to apply to this research and answer the research questions based on the theoretical framework, rather than everything my participants mentioned about during the

fieldwork. So, the risk of using the information to directly identify participants through their acquaintances was minimised to the greatest extent possible for privacy protection.

4.7 Data collection and data analysis

As discussed in section 4.2, this research's constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology emphasise the use of qualitative methods and highlight the importance of conducting an in-depth exploration of child participants' perspectives. Apart from the reason of having to switch to online data collection due to the aftermath of COVID-19, online interviews were also replaced by instant audio and text messages during the mid-stage of data collection as illustrated in Diagram 4.7.2 below. This is because, after conducting a few rounds of online interviews, I found that some of my participants felt more comfortable and relaxed sharing more when using instant messages. Details of fieldwork experience and changes in data collection methods will be presented below in section 4.7.2. What I want to emphasise here is that the replacement of data collection methods at this stage was just as valid as both online and in-person interviews, as all methods allowed me to generate data that contributed to in-depth exploration of LBC's perspectives.

Also, by breaking down discourse analysis, narrative analysis, and thematic analysis (my data analysis methods) into a few steps, following a sequence shown in Diagram 4.7.3 below, the analysis achieved an in-depth exploration of children's perspectives while incorporating context-related explanations. This process also demonstrated the child-led formation of Chapter 6 and 7, and my insider-outsider positionality in justifying my ontological and epistemological stances, as outlined in section 4.2 above.

4.7.1 Data collection methods and process

Specific data collection methods and processes

Narrative inquiry helps record participants' experiences which demonstrates their own perspectives (Padgett, 2014; Liamputtong, 2019). I invited participants to share their lived experiences, with some personal stories embedded, which can help generate valuable data for further narrative analysis (which will be addressed in section 4.7.3 below). Sharing personal stories is also an accessible and effective way for participants to provide meaningful data in a

narrative way. Additionally, I think that paying full attention to participants' personal stories from their social experiences with peers can engage their interest and encourage their continued participation in my research, supporting its qualification as a longitudinal design.

Thus, I used online video calls, audio, and text messages to conduct interviews. I also observed participants' posts on WeChat Moments to collect supplementary data remotely. I also did in-person interviews when I was able to travel back to China after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted. Thus, for online data collection part, video calls, audio and text messages, and WeChat Moments observation were the main methods. For the in-person data collection part, in-person interviews and text messages were the main methods. In all, there were in total five different data collection methods. Diagram 4.7.2 below shows the 5 data collection methods adopted in different stages of the data collection process.

I also adjusted my data collection methods at different stages due to a few reasons. The adjustments and the ethics of using digital platform to collect data will be respectively addressed below in this section and in section 4.7.3 below.

A longitudinal design of data collection

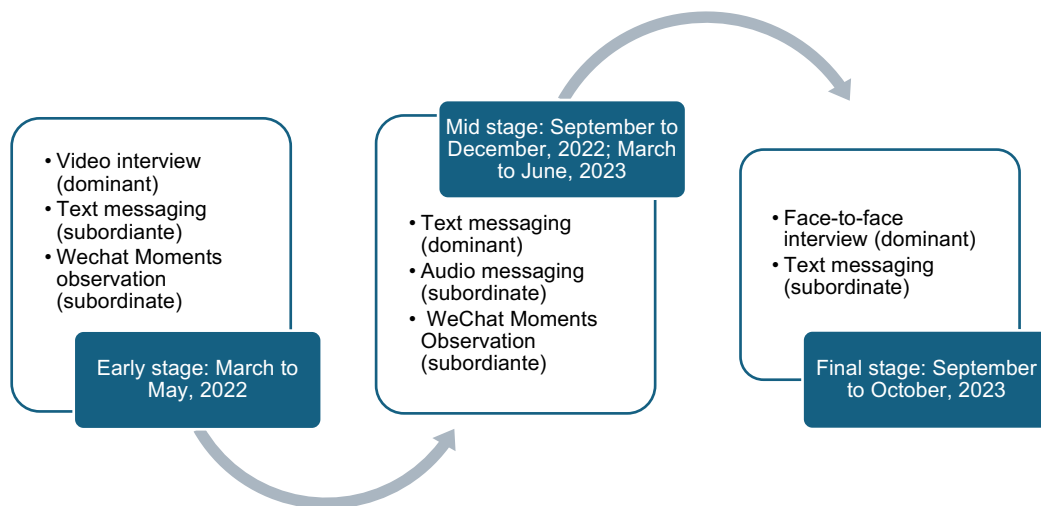
Considering the dynamics of LBC's peer social networks (also mentioned in section 4.6.1), a longitudinal design helps to identify related changes that might appear in participants' lives. Twenty months of data collection is the time span for the longitudinal design of this research. However, the data collection was not carried out continuously during this period. Interviews with participants were conducted only during specific months and dates, resulting in the formation of panel data sets, which are generally defined as data collected from the same group of participants over multiple time periods (Schneider, 2019). Further details can be found in Table 4.7.2(2) below. The table is a Gantt chart that illustrates data collection period for each participant. It also corresponds to the colored sections, indicating the overall time span of interviews and messages, as shown in Table 4.7.2(1) above. In addition, the Gantt chart below also discloses the data collection methods that were employed in different time periods with different participants.

For the interviews and messages conducted online, with the exception of

Table 4.7.2 (1) Participants and related information

No	Pseudonym (in an order of appearance in empirical chapters)	Age	Gender	Commuter (C) / boarder (B) / not applicable (N/A)	Peers involved in extracts : In family (F)/ in school (S)	Adults involved in extracts: family members (F)/ school teachers (T)/ None (N)	Left-behind living conditions: both parents migrate (B) and live with grandparents /one parent migrates (O) and live with parents	Living area: rural (R)/urban (U) areas	Times for online and in-person interview (I)/ instant text and audio messages by dates (M)	Online (O) interview s or messages / face-to-face interview s (F)	Interviews/messages time span (the blue colored sections apply to a longitudinal design)	Label of 34 extracts (each label represents an extract; extract SH is counted twice)	Appearance in empirical chapters (5-7)
1	Anticipation	14-15	F	C	S	T	B	U	I: 1; M:17	O	March, 2022-September, 2022	AT1; AT2	Chapter 5, 6, 7
2	Charlotte	9	F	N/A	S	N	B	U	I:1	F	October, 2023	CE	Chapter 5, 7
3	Hayden	14-15	F	C	F and S	N	O	R	I:2; M:19	O	March, 2022-October, 2022	HN1; SH; HN2; HN3	Chapter 5, 6, 7
4	Jason	11	M	N/A	S	T	B	U	I:1	F	October, 2023	JS	Chapter 5
5	Eric	11	M	N/A	F and S	N	O	U	I:1	F	October, 2023	EC	Chapter 5
6	Carl	11	M	N/A	F and S	N	B	U	I:1	F	October, 2023	CL	Chapter 5
7	Grace	12	F	C	S	T	O	R	M: 7	O	March, 2023- April, 2023	GR1; GR2	Chapter 5, 7
8	Hazel	14-15	F	C	F and S	T and F	B	U	M: 33	O	March, 2022-September, 2023	HL1; HL2; HL3; HL4; HL5	Chapter 5, 6, 7
9	Pangolin	15-16	M	From C to B	S	T and F	B	From R to U	I:1; M:21	O	March, 2022-March, 2023	PG1; PG2; PG3; PG4; PG5	Chapter 5,6, 7
10	Sophia	15-16	F	From C to B	F and S	F	B	From R to U	I:2; M:18	O	March, 2022-September, 2022	SP	Chapter 5
11	Chole	9	F	C	S	F and T	B	U	I: 3	F	October, 2023	CA;	Chapter 5
12	Amy	9	F	C	F	F	B	U	I: 2	F	October, 2023	AM	Chapter 5
13	Weiai	14-15	F	C	F and S	F and T	B	U	I: 1; M: 23	O	March, 2022-December, 2022	WA1; WA2; WA3;	Chapter 6, 7

14	Aubrey	12	F	B	S	T	O	R	M: 8	O	March, 2023-July, 2023	AU1; AU2	Chapter 6
15	Quincy	11	F	B	S	T	O	R	M: 5	O	April, 2023	QU1; QU2	Chapter 6
16		12	M	C	S	F and T	B	R	M: 7	O	March, 2023-April, 2023	KV1; KV2	Chapter 6, 7

Diagram 4.7.2. Data collection methods used at different stages of data collection process

Quincy, all the other participants were followed up for several weeks or months, which met the criteria for a longitudinal design (Neale, 2021) for this research. Moreover, the in-person interviews that were conducted in October 2023 were one-off events. Although they did not qualify as a part of a longitudinal design, they also serve as effective supplementary data for the data sets that were collected longitudinally.

Adjustment for data collection methods and relevant experience

At the early stage of data collection from March to May 2022, I switched from conducting online interviews to using instant audio or texts messages. It was later discovered that utilising WeChat was an effective method for data collection with my participants, compared to in-person interviews conducted online. This was because some participants were reluctant to engage in face-to-face online interactions. It turned out that they became more open with me when instant messages were used to replace online face-to-face interviews. Social media like WeChat indeed helped relieve social awkwardness and embarrassment (Wang et al., 2018; Gao et al., 2021) during the early stage of data collection. I accommodated the personal needs and requests of the participants, especially considering that they only knew me online and not in person. I also obtained their consent before changing the main data collection methods.

Meanwhile, during the early and mid-stages of data collection, I had no

in-person interactions with my participants. As a result, observing their WeChat Moments to initiate private conversations with them became a supplementary data collection method, while online interviews and messages served as the dominant ones. The related ethical issues regarding the observation of WeChat Moments will be addressed in section 4.7.3 below, which focuses on digital platform ethics.

Following a well-supported approach in qualitative research, I conducted analysis simultaneously with data collection. This parallel process allowed me to refine my understanding and adapt my data collection strategies in real-time, enhancing the depth and relevance of my findings (Miller, 2000; Coffey, 2001). After completing the early and mid-stages of data collection, I realised that the existing data sets were not sufficient to form up a thesis. Meanwhile, since the time available for a PhD project is limited, I was unable to conduct another round of longitudinal data collection. Therefore, in light of the need for additional data and with reduced dependence on the longitudinal design, I returned to China to conduct in-person, face-to-face interviews at a primary school in October 2023.

In qualitative research, the occurrence of repetitions in data collection is regarded as data saturation (Ary et al., 2009). It turned out that the face-to-face interviews rapidly contributed to data sets and also met the basic requirement for qualitative data saturation. I also noticed that, from different participants, I could always generate similar yet slightly different narrations that indicated the same conceptualisation after several rounds of in-person face-to-face interviews. Hence, I ceased my data collection entirely in October 2023.

4.7.2 Data analysis methods and process

Specific data analysis methods

Three data analysis methods were employed in this research: narrative analysis, thematic analysis, and discourse analysis. The thirty-four extracts used in this research were generated through these three data analysis methods. The 5 steps taken to process the data, along with examples of data processing and analysis, are presented in Diagram 4.7.3 and Table 4.7.3 below, to precisely illustrate how these extracts were generated from all of the collected data.

Table 4.7.2 (2) The Gantt chart of data collection period for each participant

Part 1. From March to December, 2022; “I” represents interviews, “M” represents messages;

[illegible]

Part 2. From January to October, 2023; “I” represents interviews, “M” represents messages;

No.	Pseudonym (in an order of appearance in empirical chapters)	Online (O) interviews or messages/ face-to- face interviews (F)	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October
1	Anticipation	O										
2	Charlotte	F										I
3	Hayden	O										
4	Jason	F										I
5	Eric	F										I
6	Carl	F										I
7	Grace	O			M	M						
8	Hazel	O			M	M		M			M	
9	Pangolin	O			M							
10	Sophia	O										
11	Chole	F										I
12	Amy	F										I
13	Weiai	O				M						
14	Aubrey	O				M						
15	Quincy	O				M						
16	Kevin	O			M	M						

As addressed in section 4.7.2 above, the approaches of narrative inquiry embedded within my data collection methods are in line with the requirements for conducting narrative analysis (Ary et al., 2009). The use of narrative inquiry also coincides with the call for giving voices to children's voice (James, 2007) when conducting research with children and youth. WeChat Moments posts were also used to support the analysis of their narrations.

In thematic analysis, commonality is essential (Terry and Hayfield, 2021). Researchers often examine data sets and identify common themes, which is also an analysis method that is widely used in the research field of children and youth (Heberle et al., 2018; Liebenberg et al., 2020; Terry and Hayfield, 2021). The common themes that I generated from my data sets have a theoretical basis. I categorised the narrations from participants by using the theoretical framework. As discussed in the theoretical framework chapter (Chapter 3) and shown in Diagram 4.4.2 and Table 4.5 in this chapter, three major themes—agency, constraints and normativity negotiation and related justification—emerge as the themes. For each of these major themes, there are also sub-themes that were clearly identified.

In fact, thematic analysis was initiated not only during the data analysis phase, but also during the process of converting conceptual definitions to operational ones when formulating the interview prompts. Moreover, as discussed in section 4.7.2 above, data analysis was conducted simultaneously with data collection. Thus, the processes of conducting thematic analysis for structuring the three empirical chapters were dynamic since themes emerged from the data sets. The adjustments made to the theoretical framework, which incorporated thematic analysis, were also based on these emerging themes from the collected data.

Discourse analysis was adopted for analysing data by considering the different contexts (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2012) of LBC's peer relationships in the forms of vocal or written words (Gee, 2014) obtained from interviews and instant messages. Since online text messages were one of the dominant data collection methods and they appear in textual form, they were used to conduct discourse analysis. However, discourse analysis is not only associated with languages and texts that emerged during data collection but also relates to

cross-cultural explanations (Johnstone and Andrus, 2024). This research is a cross-cultural study, and the data collection was conducted entirely in Chinese. Hence, cross-cultural explanations were utilised when converting Chinese transcriptions into English extracts. This also aligns with the related debates in children's geographies regarding cross-cultural perspectives, which were addressed in section 3.4 in Chapter 3.

These text messages and cross-cultural explanations were also themed based on the theoretical framework. By utilising text messages, the narrative analysis of the participants' life stories was conducted. Meanwhile, cross-cultural explanation did not conflict with the thematic analysis that had been conducted, considering that it functioned as a supplementary analysis following the completion of thematic analysis. This implies that discourse analysis was the final step in the data analysis process.

Processing data analysis and related examples

Part of the data analysis was conducted simultaneously with data collection. Once data collection was concluded in October 2023, data analysis continued until I completed my thesis draft. The data analysis conducted prior to the completion of data collection was instrumental in adjusting the theoretical framework and ensuring consistency among the three empirical chapters. In other words, the interconnections among the different concepts and theories that constituted the theoretical framework and the empirical chapters, in fact, benefited from the data analysis conducted before the completion of data collection. Further related discussions will be presented in the section below, which addresses the experiences and adjustments made during data analysis.

In Diagram 4.7.3 below, I have outlined 5 steps that I took to analyse data, along with the specific data analysis methods involved. As shown in the diagram, Step 1 entailed gathering narrative data from the participants. During this step, discourse analysis based on instant messages and translated transcriptions was also conducted. Step 2 involved identifying key elements that can be utilised for thematic analysis, based on the narratives collected from the participants. Subsequently, I used the three key elements in the conceptual framework to categorise the narrative data, which constituted as Step 3. Then, discourse analysis related to cross-cultural explanations (as discussed above)

was conducted based on the thematically categorised data, as outlined in Step 4. Finally, I presented the data based on the previous four steps, which is Step 5.

Not every extract needs cross-cultural explanations, since the relevant English translations did not impede a comprehensive understanding of these extracts. Moreover, cross-cultural explanations were not included in Step 5, as normally such explanations were utilised after a specific Chinese term was identified. Footnotes were created to incorporate these explanations in the empirical chapters, except when diagrams or tables were needed.

In Table 4.7.3 below, I will provide three examples of processing and analysing qualitative data, with the five steps incorporated to demonstrate that all the data analysis methods were effectively utilised to address the three research questions.

Experience and adjustments during data analysis

As mentioned in section 4.7.2, I adjusted my data collection methods across different periods to meet the needs of participants and adapt to research circumstances. Similarly, I began data analysis at the early stage of data collection to guide any changes to the theoretical framework, research questions, and interview prompts. This ensured logical coherence, consistency, and smooth flow within the thesis. After that, I also adjusted related sections to align with the theoretical framework. In fact, the process of thesis finalisation was deeply rooted in data analysis. And, it could not be separated from the sections related to the theoretical framework.

After few rounds of revisiting and reorganising my data, I also came to realise that the same extract can be applied to answer multiple research questions. Related examples can be found in Table 4.7.3. Data analysis is an iterative process. This process enabled me to make fullest use of my data sets.

4.8 Ethics

As argued in section 3.4 of Chapter 3, the debates in children's geographies and cross-cultural perspectives play a crucial role in shaping the ethical considerations of this research involving Chinese LBC. Besides the university-based procedural ethics, which, I argue, is Western-oriented, the cultural

differences and the way I contextualise ethics when incorporating local knowledge and indigenous ethics in China will also be explored in section 4.8.2 below. Moreover, since the main data sets were obtained from WeChat, the ethics regarding the use of digital platforms for research with children and youth will also be addressed in section 4.8.3 below.

4.8.1 University-based procedural ethics and practical experience

Ethical approval for conducting the fieldwork of this project was granted by the University in February 2022. Ethical approval for conducting the fieldwork of this project was granted by the University in February 2022. The reference number for this approval is AREA 21-029. The Chinese version of the information sheets, informed consent forms (including those for verbal consent) for both child participants and their parents and/or guardians, as well as the letter of permission for schoolteachers and administrators, were used during data collection. The 6 appendices attached to this thesis contain only the English versions of the information sheets, the letter of permission, and both written and verbal informed consent forms for the different groups of people involved. Since these documents were prepared prior to fieldwork for the purpose of applying for ethical approval, there was a discrepancy between the anticipated and actual ages of the participants. During the fieldwork process, I expanded the age range to include Chinese LBC aged 9 to 16.

The sections that follow, which focus on university-based procedural ethics, are not related to the content that already covered in the original ethics application form. Instead, they will reflect on the ethical issues that arose during my fieldwork.

Informed consent, the right to withdraw, and my exclusion of some participants

The process of gaining permissions and consents has been discussed in section 4.5.1, which pertains to the approach taken when engaging with participants. The design of this process can be linked to my understanding of the structural constraints that children face in reality, as well as my aim to explore LBC's peer interactions within both family and school contexts. Since this research centres on relationships, from the perspective of identifying relational constraints, adults in both family and school contexts were approached first to secure permissions (from school staff) and consents (from

surrogate parents or migrant parents). Meanwhile, on the original informed consent forms, I addressed the voluntariness of participating in my research by stating that participants can withdraw freely before or on 31 July 2022. However, despite being informed of this right, no one exercised it. I also reiterated this right when initially making contact with the participants. This was because both the children and adults involved in the research had limited knowledge of westernised ethical procedures. I endeavoured to create an environment that allowed my participants to freely choose whether to continue their participation or withdraw, based on their own agency and instincts. In fact, I did lose some participants without any formal withdrawal being declared, which precisely reflects their agency in handling the researcher-participant relationships. Moreover, for those individuals whom I did not retain in my research, they were unable to supply the data necessary to answer my research questions. As a researcher, I also possess the agency to exclude those participants who agreed to take part in the research but failed to provide me with useful data, as they did not contribute to answering the research questions at hand. Overall, of the 30 participants initially recruited, 16 remained actively involved throughout the research process. The other 14 were excluded due to a lack of engagement. Specifically, these participants stopped responding to follow-up messages or did not participate meaningfully in ongoing activities. This was understood as an implicit decision to withdraw from the study. Given the study's qualitative and relational nature, I prioritised participants who remained communicative and provided rich, relevant data. This decision ensured the quality and depth of the findings while acknowledging the fluid nature of participation in child-focused research.

Anonymity

To adhere to the principle of anonymity, I employed pseudonyms to label and distinguish between participants. Initially, I invited participants to select pseudonyms for themselves, thereby respecting their agency in the research process. However, during the final stage of data collection, I noticed that the legal name of one participant was the same as another participant's pseudonym in Chinese. To prevent any confusion, I replaced some of the pseudonyms with English names while retaining some of the original Chinese pseudonyms

chosen by certain participants. This method of combining English and Chinese pseudonyms ensured compliance with the principle of anonymity.

I used my personal WeChat account to communicate remotely with the gatekeepers and participants. I also made my WeChat Moments accessible to them, allowing them to explore and become more familiar with the ordinary aspects of my life, given that our interactions were solely online. As a result, I was not anonymous to the participants. This approach proved beneficial in gaining the trust of both the participants and the gatekeepers.

Confidentiality

During the data collection, a number of participants enquired whether their fellow students were participating in my research. I adhered to a simple approach in responding to such questions, only providing yes or no answers when they took the initiative to ask. Crucially, I refrained from sharing any specific details about the individuals.

The information sheet had been circulated among four schools as a means of attracting and recruiting participants. Consequently, many students were aware of the research. Their inquiries regarding whether their peers were involved might have had an impact on their own motivation to take part. However, even if their motivation for participation was influenced by what their peers were doing, some of them still showcased their agency by independently making decisions about whether to join or withdraw. This was possible because I did not impose any pressure on them to make these choices.

Trustworthiness

Trust relationship in research is one of the dimensions related to trustworthiness in ethics (Bachmann and Zaheer, 2006). Such trust relationships can exist between two individuals, among members of the same team, or across different teams or organisations (Bachmann and Zaheer, 2006). Given that this research focuses on relationships, the trust relationship in an ethical context is of utmost importance.

The trust relationships I established with my gatekeepers are manifested in several issues that emerged during the data collection process. One of my gatekeepers, who is a school principal, provided me with a table containing

Diagram 4.7.3. The sequence of processing collected data

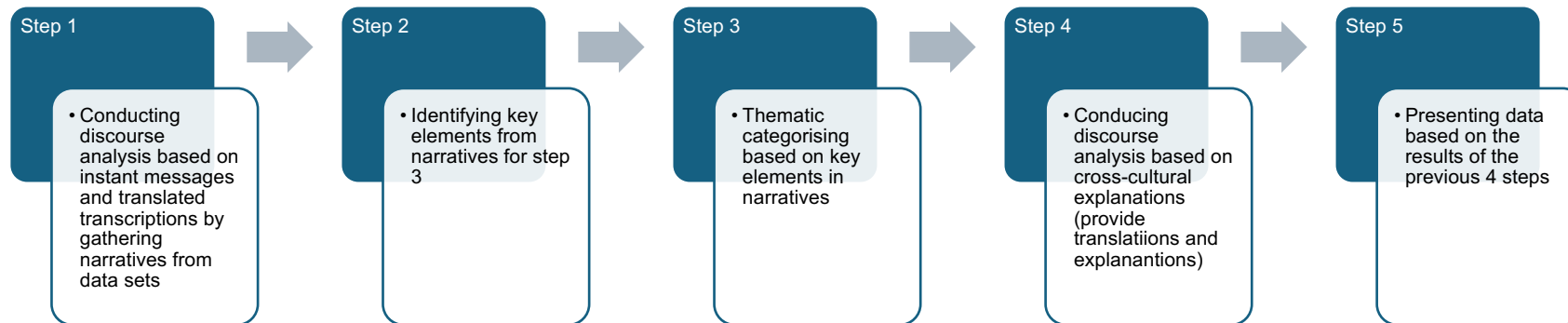


Table 4.7.3. Examples of processing and analysing qualitative data

Empirical chapter (5,6,7)	Step 1: Conducting discourse analysis based on text messages and translated transcriptions by gathering narratives from data sets	Step 2: Identifying key elements from narratives for step 3	Step 3: Thematic categorizing based on key elements in narratives	Step 4: Conducting discourse analysis based on cross-cultural explanations	Step 5: Describing data based on the results of the previous 4 steps	Related research questions answered
Chapter 5	Extract CE from Charlotte: Extract CE is translated transcription generated from one-off face-to-face in-person interview; “...I just took a revenge by myself only when I was hit by them first. If they were just cursing me or did something softer, I just ignore them. ...” “...I guess after knowing that I am an avenger, they rarely pick on me. I am a <i>mulaohu</i>, ha-ha-ha. ...”	took a revenge; an avenger; pick on me; <i>mulaohu</i>;	tangible agency; viewing her agency as active participation given Charlotte actively took part in resisting unfair treatment made by her peers in school; a sense of inequality is evident in the extract CE;	<i>Mulaohu</i>, in Chinese characters: 母老虎. It means a tigress or a shrew. She described herself as a <i>mulaohu</i> with a victorious smile and a self-deprecating sense of humour considering that the traditional and conservative culture of Chinese society has an expectation for women or girls to be obedient, gentle, or soft (Ji, 2015).	...extract CE also disclosed Charlotte's active participation in taking revenge while she was wrongly treated by some classmates... ...though it was not clear that whether <i>mulaohu</i> is a label that Charlotte's peers use to describe her or not, it is still unexpected that she used it to characterize herself ... It seems that she thought that she was going against the expectation that the society has for	RQ 1

					females. Nonetheless, she seemed did not care at all as mentioned in the extract...	
Chapter 6	Extract SP from Sophia: Extract SP is translated transcription generated from online text messages; “...My younger sister used to hang out with gangsters. She totally wasted her talent in drawing which could help her earn extra points as gifted students in National College Entrance Examination...” “...Our parents want to help her to get back on the right track, but it does not work as she kept meeting with those gangsters...” “...I also persuaded her for so many times. Maybe, she thought it was a twice-told story from our parents so that she just ignored what I said...”	gangsters; talent; NCEE; kept meeting with gangsters; persuaded; twice-told story; ignored;	relational constraints imposed by adults in family that affects peer interactions in family; tangible agency; viewing her agency as relational agency given she worried her sister's living situation just like their parents; viewing her agency as criteria using given she adopted parents' expectations on her peer younger sister regarding her social networks and prospects in relation to education;	According to National College Entrance Examination (or in Mandarin <i>pinyin</i>: <i>gaokao</i>, in Chinese characters: 高考) related policies in China, gifted pupils could enjoy extra points (Davey et al., 2007) so that they can get into better universities or colleges compared with the traditional pathway of only having their academic performance counted (Yang, 2004). Also, children's education is heavily valued by parents in China, and being left behind is not an exception of this type of parental expectation on their educational pathways (Hu, 2019).	...Sophia's relational agency is acting as a parent to her younger sister by using parents' expectations regarding social networks with peers and education and stepping into parental roles to take care of younger ones after parental migration...(in response to RQ1) ...Her agency is also constrained and directed by her parents' expectations regarding her younger sister's future and relevant parenting styles for educating the two sisters in this family, that is why Sophia cannot generate other effective approaches to persuade her younger sister but only adopted parental style that is rejected by her younger sister...(in response to RQ2)	RQ 1 and RQ2
Chapter 7	Extract KV2 from Kevin: ... Kevin: Everyone in the class will directly point it out if someone brings snacks. Me: Are you in those people who help the <i>banzhuren</i> to tackle	point it out; classroom snack bringing and eating problem; member of class committee; <i>banzhuren</i>; dissatisfied in you;	Relational constraints imposed by adults in school that has an impact on Kevin's peer interactions in his class; The constraints are some ground rules that set by their <i>banzhuren</i>, rules	Class committee (in Mandarin <i>pinyin</i>: <i>banweihui</i>, in Chinese characters: 班委会) refers to a group of student leaders that led by the <i>banzhuren</i> in a class (Zhu, 2021a). Normally this group of students help the	...Kevin's compliant agency in peer interactions in school is constrained by the <i>banzhuren</i> and the ground rules set by the <i>banzhuren</i>. The constraints have an impact on Kevin's peer interactions in school,	RQ2 and RQ3

classroom snack bringing and eating problem? Kevin: I am. Me: Are you the members of the class committee? Kevin: No. Me: ...will there be classmates who are dissatisfied in you because that they think you are on the teacher's side? Kevin: Not really. We get back together after a while. ...	on the teacher's side; get back together after a while;	such as no snack in classroom; Justifying the ground rules that set by the <i>banzhuren</i> and help the <i>banzhuren</i> to supervise his peers in the classroom; Being compliant while justifying adults' constraints;	<i>banzhuren</i> to manage the whole class in all aspects, such as supervising fellow students' academic performance, physical exercise, entertainment activities and general affairs (Li and Chen, 2013; Hansen, 2014). So, they have different roles. Especially, the class monitor helps manage almost everything in general as what the <i>banzhuren</i> might do (Liu et al., 2018). The <i>banzhuren</i> (Mandarin <i>pinyin</i>; in Chinese characters: 班主任) in China is the teacher who is responsible for a whole fixed class (Li and Chen, 2013). Normally they also teach specific subjects. However, compared with other teachers, they have more responsibilities in leading the whole class, such as nominating student members of class committee, organizing parent-teacher meetings (Liu et al., 2018).	given Kevin actively involves himself in helping the <i>banzhuren</i> to put the ground rules into practice. Kevin's reaction to the constraints is legitimizing them when interacting with peers. Kevin's agency in peer interactions in school also lies in his positive reactions to the constraints. He was also very optimistic about his relationships with his fellow students, given he got back together with them even they all knew that Kevin recognised their behaviors of breaking the rules. Hence, peers' reactions did not affect Kevin's compliant agency in the class ground rules set by the <i>banzhuren</i>. It also echoes with the argument that the <i>banzhuren</i> is the relational constraint for Kevin and her fellow students. ...	
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information on potential participants that exceeded my requirements. Although this might be considered an unethical act from a certain perspective, it can also be seen as evidence that I was fully trusted by this gatekeeper. I became acquainted with this gatekeeper through my own social networks. Within these social networks, trust was naturally acquired without any suspicion. This trust was formed prior to the data collection process. Another gatekeeper, who is also a surrogate parent of one of my participants, came to express gratitude to me for taking the time to communicate with the participant and keep them company.

Furthermore, as researchers have pointed out, 'a trustworthy party is one that will not unfairly exploit the vulnerabilities of the other party in the relationship' (Bachmann and Zaheer, 2006, p.308). Consequently, researchers' understanding of participants' vulnerabilities and their demonstration of respect are crucial for building trust relationships between participants, who are regarded as vulnerable individuals, and the researchers themselves. The vulnerabilities of my participants can be identified in the literature review chapter (Chapter 2), where discussions regarding their mental and physical well-being are presented. I consistently prioritised their needs during data collection, considering that their vulnerabilities have been thoroughly debated by researchers and are widely acknowledged. Meanwhile, the aim of this project is to de-stereotype LBC and attempt to showcase their agency as a strength rather than a vulnerability. Thus, in the data analysis and thesis drafting stages, I have endeavoured to highlight participants' agency in the face of their vulnerabilities. Referring to the definitions of LBC in section 4.3.2 above, I also mentioned the relevant debates in LBC studies regarding the stigmatisation of the term LBC in both practice and academia. This concern is consistent with how I emphasised their agency within the context of their vulnerabilities in this research.

4.8.2 Addressing cultural differences in the context of ethics

In this section, I will explore some ethical dimensions involving cross-cultural perspectives that I experienced during my fieldwork. As addressed in section 3.4 of Chapter 3 and in the above section on cross-cultural discourse analysis, cross-cultural perspectives are of crucial importance when researching children and young people in the Majority World. Hence, it is equally essential to deliberate on culture-related ethical considerations.

I obtained a research-focused master's degree in China and also completed the entire process of applying for ethical approval for a UK-based PhD project. Generally speaking, I think the westernised ethical system is well-established compared to the corresponding system in China. However, addressing cultural differences within the context of ethics plays an important role in cross-cultural research, given that power dynamics and social norms vary across different social contexts. Therefore, the focus of the following discussion is not on determining which country has a better-established research ethics system. Instead, I will address cultural differences in an attempt to contextualise or adapt ethics for my research.

The incompatibility of procedural ethics

First, the Disclosure and Barring Service Check (DBS check)¹¹ is not applicable in China. When I was applying for ethical approval, I did not conduct a DBS check as it is a UK-based official document. Moreover, my gatekeepers in China did not request it when they gave approval for my fieldwork or consented to having their children participate in my research. Instead, I think that the social networks I possess in China played a significant role in helping me gain trust and establish trust relationships during the data collection. It appears that, in China, interpersonal trust proves to be more valuable and holds greater importance than the outcome of a DBS check.

Meanwhile, in my view, my gatekeepers did not adhere to westernised ethics when helping me to recruit participants. This is evident from the section above regarding trustworthiness in research, where I mentioned about an instance of what could be considered unethical. Additionally, it became clear when I noticed that one of my gatekeepers seemed to overlook participants' privacy and the associated duties of privacy protection. This particular gatekeeper, who is also a school principal, interrupted an interview between my participants and me because the principal thought that my participants were using participation in my research as an excuse to skip classes. From these two incidents, it is apparent that school principals acting as my gatekeepers in China tended to prioritise their responsibilities as school administrative staff over safeguarding

¹¹ A Disclosure and Barring Service Check, in short DBS check, is a background check conducted in the UK to determine if an individual has a criminal record or is on a list that bars them from working with vulnerable groups, such as children or elderly adults (GOV.UK, n.d.).

the participants and evaluating the ethics of my research. They promptly moved on to the next task at hand and did not focus on validating my research.

Consequently, their position did not align with the expectations established in advance by westernised ethics. The reasons for this may vary, but the key point here is to highlight the incompatibility of UK-based procedural ethics when conducting research related to children and young people in a non-UK context.

It was precisely because I recognised this incompatibility of procedural ethics that I went on to search for other relevant literature in ethics to explore this issue further. The following two sections are also highly relevant to this incompatibility and the approach I took to prioritise context when dealing with ethical matters.

Contextualising power disparities and power plays: understanding local knowledge and indigenous ethics

Children's agency arises from the power imbalance between children and adults. Based on this argument, researchers have made efforts to empower children and youth within the research setting, aiming to reduce this power disparity between the two parties. Furthermore, it has been argued that without grounding local knowledge in understanding the power disparity between children and adults (Clacherty and Donald, 2007), it would be challenging to unveil childhood within a global context. Also, the interpretation of local or indigenous power plays between children and adults in the ethics of cross-cultural childhood studies remain inadequate. This aspect is regarded as highly crucial in this research. The related discussions concerning the contextualisation of power disparities between my participants and adults involved can be located in the analysis that incorporates cross-cultural explanations in the empirical chapters (Chapter 5, 6 and 7). This serves as an attempt on my part, as a researcher, to uncover indigenous ethics.

Researchers have also proposed and discussed numerous methods that they employed during their research with children and youth to mitigate such power disparity. These methods involve taking part in the same activities as children do, dining and playing games together with children in school, and avoiding close contact with the authority recognised by children (Abebe, 2009; Atkinson, 2019). However, other debates emphasise that different approaches aimed at empowering children in research might cause new forms of power imbalance

between children (the ones being researched) and adults (the researchers) (Atkinson, 2019). Moreover, when researchers leave the field, such symbolic empowerment might not necessarily result in substantive changes. Therefore, aside from attempting to reduce the power disparity between my participants and I by making my WeChat Moments accessible to them and using my personal WeChat account for conducting fieldwork, I placed greater emphasis on explaining the power disparities that I had identified from the interview extracts collected from my participants. These power disparities were already present in the relationships between the participants and the surrounding adults. Moreover, in this research, adults' power, particularly that of schoolteachers, is perceived as being productive rather than harmful when conducting research with LBC. Meanwhile, I did not position myself as a teacher who have power over my participants and can instruct them on maintaining sensitivity to empowerment in research. In fact, participants already appeared to have a strong awareness of the power disparity between themselves and adults. In addition, my positionality will be explored in greater detail in section 4.8.2 below.

Replacing monetary incentives with age-appropriate information exchange

Even though the question of whether to pay participants of any age remains a matter of debate, the related discussions on the ethics of providing payment for children's participation in research have unveiled valuable insights regarding the use of incentives in research involving children (Wendler et al., 2002). Also, according to the online guidance offered by Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC), it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that children's participation does not impact their family's economic wellbeing (Robson, 2021). Meanwhile, when conducting research across cultural contexts, incentives or the issue of payment should be carefully considered (Abebe, 2020). Based on these prior discussions about the ethics of paying for children's participation, I decided to remove monetary incentives from my research, with the reasons detailed in the following paragraph.

I did not use monetary incentives to compensate and who appreciation to my participants for their involvement. I assumed that it could be harmful to them. As suggested by existing research on LBC, the migrant parents of LBC send remittances to support them but often fail to provide adequate care. This has led

some LBC to view parent-child relationships as transactional ones combined with money, and even perceive themselves as being less important than money to their parents (Zhou et al., 2018; Hu, 2019). This concern also aligns with one of the arguments within the debates on the negative impact of paying participants, which holds that paying participants amounts to commodifying research participation (Wendler et al., 2002). Hence, monetary incentives might cause my participants to associate their participation in my research with their relationships with migrant parents in a monetary context, potentially harming them emotionally. Moreover, as has been argued, reimbursement is one form of payment that covers participants' travel costs or any research-related expenses (Wendler et al., 2002). Since I conducted my research remotely during the early and mid-stages of data collection, reimbursement for travel costs was not relevant. I also travelled back to China to conduct in-person, face-to-face interviews, but logistically there were no expenses for which I needed to reimburse my participants.

According to my pre-PhD fieldwork experience, LBC were eager to make friends with people outside of their daily routines. During data collection for this research, they asked me many non-research-related questions. So, I carried out an age-appropriate information exchange with them, which was regarded as reimbursement for their participation. For instance, I shared my English learning skills and some study abroad stories and experiences in exchange.

4.8.3 Addressing digital platform ethics in data collection

Functions of WeChat

WeChat is a multipurpose social application that enjoys widespread daily usage within the Chinese-speaking world, especially in Mainland China (Montag et al., 2018). Compared to traditional in-person interviews, using WeChat to conduct research with children and youth is a relatively novel approach. As a mainstream social platform, WeChat has a vast number of users (Montag et al., 2018), thereby enhancing the feasibility of conducting research with children and youth on this platform.

Digital methods were used by researchers to explore how children negotiate their agency on social media when interacting with peers and adults (de Block and Buckingham, 2007). Similar to this research, I think WeChat also facilitates

Chinese children in exercising their agency and managing their social networks by utilising some features or functions. WeChat users can block and delete anyone to maintain their exclusive social networks (Silas, n.d.). Meanwhile, WeChat Moments is a feature embedded within WeChat that allows users who have enabled it to post texts or pictures with captions while socialising exclusively with their friends (Montag et al., 2018). Users could block anyone on WeChat whom they added previously as friends, preventing them from reading their posts on WeChat Moments without deleting them (Wang et al., 2018). Users who have added the same person in a given social network but are not mutual friends on WeChat cannot directly read or comment on each other's posts on WeChat Moments (Anon, n.d.). Users can also make labels to categorise different people on WeChat and selectively display their posts (Suotmaa, 2016).

For LBC and their migrant parents, WeChat serves as the most convenient digital tool for communication when they live apart from one another (Hu et al., 2020). Although smartphones are still not allowed in most of schools in China, LBC usually have their own smartphones at home and can use them during after-school hours to make video calls or send text messages to their migrant parents. This is also considered as a strategy for maintaining social intimacy with parents (Chen, 2020). Even though the ethics of utilising digital methods to conduct research with children and youth remains a matter of debate, it has been argued that children and young people, as social agents, have the competence to make their own decisions when accessing the digital world (Livingstone and Third, 2017). Consequently, I chose to use WeChat to conduct remote longitudinal data collection with those participants who own smartphones.

As mentioned above, at the early stage of my data collection, I conducted a few online video calls with some of the participants. Later, I switched from online interviews to audio and text messages to meet their personal needs. All these methods were employed based on the trust that I had in them. I think my participants can block or delete me through chat boxes on WeChat. They can also make their WeChat Moments invisible to me. Although most of them did not do so. Meanwhile, since I did not conduct participatory research with my

participants in person, observing WeChat Moments served as a supplementary means for the social interactions between my participants and me.

Ethics in using WeChat and smartphones in research with children and youth

In fact, some of my participants informed me that they were only allowed by their parents or guardians (who take care of them after parental migration) to use smartphones during weekends or after-school hours. Some of them did not disclose such rules to me. Also, smartphones were not allowed in the four schools where I completed my fieldwork. So, I only conducted data collection with my participants during after-school hours, after they had finished their homework. That is why a longitudinal design is needed in this research, as most conversations were limited and constrained by such smartphone usage rules in combination with the time that participants spent on their homework and on their leisure activities. Even though WeChat helped to reduce the social awkwardness between my participants and me, who were merely strangers to each other, it also decreased the number of times I interviewed my participants via WeChat. So, in-person face-to-face interviews were employed to generate complementary data for the previous data sets extracted on WeChat. Eventually, neither my participants nor my gatekeepers reported anything unethical regarding the use of WeChat to conduct remote data collection in this research. From my perspective, I also did not identify significant ethical concerns during the process. I ensured that consent was treated as an ongoing process, regularly reminding participants of their right to withdraw, and clarifying the purpose of our interactions throughout the online data collection period. This approach was particularly important given the remote nature of the study, where maintaining transparency and trust required additional effort.

In addition, on the premise of complying with the rules set by adults for participants' smartphones usage, I think that participants should not be overly restricted from using smartphones. Simultaneously, they should not be forced to focus more on their studies rather than accessing the digital world through smartphones. The restrictions and rules set by adults, in my view, create constraints and child - adult power disparities in the digital world. However, my positionality in this research does not allow me to break this power disparity. My positionality will be revealed in section 4.10 below. Although the rights of children and young people in the digital world is not the focus of this research, I

still think it is essential to reflect on it when relevant issues regarding child-adult power imbalance arise. Moreover, nuanced teaching strategies should be employed to guide Chinese children to use smartphones reasonably and properly both when participating in research and in their daily lives.

Also, after my fieldwork, I observed that a few participants blocked me on WeChat Moments, while most of them did not. When adult researchers are blocked, they undoubtedly encounter challenges when attempting to conduct follow-ups for their research. I respected my participants' decisions to block me on WeChat Moments, so I did not ask them to unblock me for the purpose of research. Instead, blocking adults on social media presents children's relational agency in dealing with child-adult relationships. Hence, I argue that the ethics of using WeChat and smartphones in research involving children and youth entails not only addressing adults' interference in the time children and youth spend on smartphones or in the digital world, but also respecting children's choices to exclude adults from entering their virtual social spaces. It also involves maintaining healthy boundaries when safeguarding children's personal space and privacy in the digital world.

4.9 Departure from the research site

The data collection concluded in October 2023 marked the end of my field engagement. No online or in-person data collection continued since then. Most of the participants that I interviewed on WeChat did not continue texting with me, even when they still have my WeChat. I also did not block them from WeChat Moments and instant messages as I think such of my actions align with the current Chinese social rituals in using WeChat (Chen et al., 2018). Also, we have not established stronger relationships in real life. So, it made my departure seem relatively easy to accept for them. In addition, I did not add every participant whom I interviewed in person from September to October 2023 on WeChat due to time limitation. I only added those who wish to add me and only wish to make me stay in their social networks. In all, there were only a few participants still text me occasionally to share their daily encounters, but we do not discuss the research at all. Out of courtesy, I responded to their sharing. They also did not ask me for help or mention about how and in what way that I use their data after my departure from the research field.

Although my departure did not seem particularly emotional or impactful (Coffey, 2001) for most of them, I did not adequately prepare for it as well. One participant I met in person in 2023 expressed multiple times that he missed me and looked forward to our next meeting, conveying his message through schoolteachers and the school principal. So, later, we became friends on WeChat. But he has limited access to mobile phone, so he did not text me regularly or ask me for any help. It was only through his case that I have realised the importance of an informed departure. Honestly, I have not even realised that I should have informed them before my departure, as I think it is very common in Chinese culture to build enduring social networks with others once a connection has been established. As mentioned, maintaining these connections is also viewed as a cultural ritual (Yang, 2016). So, I naturally assumed that, since they have my contact information, they could reach out to me anytime if they needed help or seemed to have concerns regarding their data. However, they did not show any signs of seeking help. Although this may sound somewhat incidental and even like an excuse, an unannounced departure may not necessarily lead to ethical issues. Particularly when the ethical standards are westernised and do not always align with eastern research context.

In Abebe's (2012) arguments regarding the social dynamics of care for AIDS-affected children in Ethiopia, those children's parents regarded researchers as powerful ones who can help solve their urgent problems. In fact, this type of expectation that parents put on researchers (Abebe, 2012) is similar to what I have experienced during fieldwork. Some of LBC's parents and guardians that I approached showed their expectations on me to act as someone who can provide company with their children at the very beginning of the fieldwork. But it seemed that this expectation also did not last after I left the research field. Also, parents (guardians) later did not get in touch with me regarding any further help or their concerns in relation to how I conduct the research with their children. Meanwhile, I understood that maintaining a relationship with me is considered as both children's and their parents' (guardians') social investments as they are building their social capital through their social networks (Ruan, 2017a). So, it may not be culturally ethical in this circumstance to cut off the connections with both.

4.10 Positionality

4.10.1 Insider-outsider positionality

The debates regarding insiders and outsiders in cross-cultural research are also very intense (Manohar et al., 2019). It is argued that researchers who share the same cultural or social norms as participants are the legitimate members of providing insights as insiders of particular cultures (Liamputtong, 2010; Manohar et al., 2019). Cultural outsiders can be regarded as having an advantageous position for researchers conducting cross-cultural research in relation to their participants. This is because being an outsider might prompt open discussions between them on topics that are sensitive for cultural insiders (Manohar et al., 2019). Based on these debates, I hold the following perspectives: Firstly, I am an outsider to my participants in the dual role of an adult and a researcher. Secondly, I am also an insider of certain Chinese cultural and social norms. These norms are also recognised by my participants. Lastly, I am an insider to the non-Chinese readership.

My outsider positionality aligns with my assumptions and my interpretations regarding LBC's understanding of social norms as relational constraints, and their normativity negotiation and self-justification when confronted with these constraints. Some of these social norms have either a negative impact or do little to reverse LBC's disadvantaged situations. Examples include gender bias, old-school preaching that incorporates traditional culture, or the unquestioning display of respect for seniority and educated people. Such norms are regarded as unacceptable when unveiling participants' agency. This outsider positionality helped identify participants' relational constraints and their coping strategies for justifying themselves within their social relationships with peers. Meanwhile, my outsider positionality gave my participants the confidence to discuss their behaviours that seemed to violate multiples rules set by adults and implemented within adult-led institutional settings. In contrast to most studies on LBC that tend to stigmatise them, I am also an outsider in the sense that I focus on researching LBC's agency rather than emphasising their vulnerabilities.

However, not every participant appeared to be cognizant of the constraints imposed on them by adults. Instead, some adapted themselves and upheld these constraints or authority figures as a means to exercise their agency among peers (as addressed in section 7.1 of Chapter 7). In the case of these

participants, I also acted as a cultural insider. To elucidate why I think those seemingly obedient participants still possess agency, I must adopt a cultural insider positionality to unveil how their agency operates within Chinese society. For the non-Chinese readership, the interpretation of these power disparities is crucial when placing both ethics and Chinese children's agency in context to decolonise childhood studies (Rabello de Castro, 2020). A cultural insider positionality is also linked to the cross-cultural perspectives that I have employed in the theoretical framework, and the cross-cultural discourse analysis that I have conducted.

In fact, the understandings of agency in the East and the West differ from each other. The interpretations regarding how Chinese culture or social rituals contribute to the child-adult power imbalance can assist Chinese cultural outsiders in comprehending the construction of agency among Chinese children. This is also comparable to how indigenous knowledge informed the ethics in this research, which was detailed in section 4.8.2 and 4.8.3 above.

4.10.2 Participant-researcher positionality

Participant-researcher positionality plays a crucial role in shaping the dynamics between my participants and I, influencing both the collection and interpretation of data. It is important to explain the relational dynamics between myself as a researcher and the participants, particularly given my insider positionality regarding cultural norms. The following are two ways participants perceived me, and the choices I made as a result.

Participants sometimes saw me as a confidant or a reliable adult from whom they could seek advice outside of the home-school settings, rather than as a researcher in the way adults typically understand. In these instances, I made certain decisions that might breach westernised ethical standards (as illustrated by Hazel's extract HL2 in section 6.1 of Chapter 6), but aligned with instrumental rituals practiced in Chinese society (also discussed above in section 3.1.4). These practices helped build trust between my participants and me as fellow Chinese and made my participants more willing to open up and share their stories.

Power dynamics are pronounced when working with child participants in a hierarchical, exam-oriented educational context, where authority figures (usually

adults surrounding LBC) and competitive pressures may shape their responses. Some of the other participants also saw me as a teacher or people in similar positions, as I approached school principals first and invited them to endorse my research and help me build trust. In this circumstance, the child-adult power imbalance emerged when navigating the participant-researcher relationship. To address this, I employed methods like instant messaging to reduce hierarchical barriers and create informal, participant-led spaces for self-expression. WeChat is such a research environment that minimises coercion and maximises authenticity. Also, as demonstrated in sections 4.7 above, the adjustments made for data collection and data analysis were all centered around the child participants.

These measures were adopted to mitigate child-adult power dynamics, which also aligns with an interpretivist epistemology that prioritises children's agency as storytellers and co-creators of knowledge, challenging adult-centric expectations. By critically reflecting on how my adult positionality might influence participants' responses, I was also mindful of the language I used, the settings in which data were collected, and the ways in which I interpret children's accounts, ensuring that their voices are represented as authentically as possible. Although the use of online interviews and in-person interviews inevitably increased the pressure on child participants in this research to express themselves freely. All of the above measures ensured that the influence of adult authority or power in this research was minimised.

4.11 Reflexivity

It has been argued that reflexivity entails questioning the assumptions that are often taken for granted in the research shaping and the research process (Finlay, 1998). Reflexivity also allows the dilemmas and challenges encountered during research to guide researchers regarding what they should do or what changes they ought to make (Johnson and Duberley, 2003). Also, it has been argued that researchers in childhood studies need to reflect on their strategies for eliciting children's voices in research, the power disparities between children and adults that shape childhoods, and the contexts that influence how children present their voices (Spyrou, 2011). Thus, I questioned my assumptions about relational agency and made related changes for this research. The details of this process are demonstrated below.

At first, I thought that exploring multiple dimensions of LBC's relational agency in their peer interactions was sufficient to help de-stereotype them in academia. However, when most of my participants expressed their awareness of certain relational constraints imposed by both peers and adults, I realised that it was not just different types of agency that I should focus on. Then, I incorporated the concepts of relational constraints, and normativity negotiation and self-justification to delve deeper into their agency, particularly the factors that shape their relational agency. The process of questioning my original assumptions started from data collection and my awareness of the essence of their narrative stories. In fact, adults and LBC's peers influence LBC's construction of agency. This also shows that even in a realm that seems unrelated to adults (the realm of children's peer relationship), adults can still have an impact. Thus, the role of adults in children's construction of agency within peer relationships is an essential aspect when exploring children's agency. Based on the conceptual changes that I mentioned above, improvements were made to the theoretical framework, research questions, conceptual and operational definitions, and the interview prompts.

I think these changes that I made for this research were mostly based on the idea of shifting perspectives from an independent researcher who took the lead in the research to someone who listened attentively to children and explored children's agency from their own perspectives. Children's thoughts, along with their portrayals of their social lives and lived experiences, have guided this research and motivated me to implement these changes. This, in turn, has demonstrated their agency in their participation within this research. As the person responsible for documenting their stories, I took into account their agency in research participation in order to complete the related writing tasks. This is what my participants have taught me as I questioned my assumptions by altering perspectives. Meanwhile, the assumptions I had formulated prior to conducting fieldwork were aimed at moving away from certain outdated expectations in studies on LBC. In fact, during my communications with the participants, they surpassed my prior expectations of them. Hence, shifting perspectives truly proved beneficial in enabling me to question my assumptions during and after the fieldwork.

Chapter 5 Understanding different types of LBC's relational agency in peer relationships

Children's relational agency in peer relationships was conceptualised by drawing on previous theories and concepts of child agency within the sociology of childhood. This has been discussed in section 3.1 of Chapter 3. The corresponding operational definitions and interview prompts were addressed in section 4.4 and 4.5, Chapter 4. To reiterate, in this research, LBCs' relational agency in peer relationships means: 1) children's active engagement in or reactions to unequal treatments made by peers in school or family contexts; 2) children's social competence or ability to shift perspectives in peer interactions and/or differentiate between peer groups; 3) children's ability to create and/or use specific criteria to label and/or categorise their peers, with related interactions involved. These are recognised as their tangible agency, as illustrated in Diagram 3.1 in Chapters 3. In contrast, their intangible agency is conceptualised as silent agency, focusing on understanding the obstacles they face in voicing themselves and their reasons for remaining silent.

Drawing on 13 extracts from 10 participants as listed in Table 5.1 below, four different types of LBC's relational agency in peer relationships in both family and school settings are identified in this chapter.

Table 5.1 Extracts involved in Chapter 5

No.	Pseudonym	Extract label	Location
1	Anticipation	AT1	section 5.1
2	Charlotte	CE	
3	Hayden	HN1	
4	Jason	JN	section 5.2
5	Eric	EC	
6	Sophia	SP	
7	Carl	CL	
8	Pangolin	PG1	section 5.3
9	Pangolin	PG2	
10	Sophia and Hayden	SH	
11	Hazel	HL1	
12	Hayden	HN2	section 5.4
13	Hayden	HN3	

Source: data collected by the researcher herself

The structure of this chapter is arranged as follows. LBC's active participation in peer relationships will be discussed in section 5.1 below. LBC's social capacity to shift perspectives and differentiate peer groups will be elaborated on in section 5.2. Their social competence or capacity to create certain criteria to label their peers will be unveiled in section 5.3. Their silent agency in peer relationship will be addressed in section 5.4, demonstrating a connection to the next chapter (Chapter 6) regarding relational constraints. The interconnections between different types of relational agency will be discussed in section 5.5 below. The evidence of relational constraints also emerged from this chapter, which will also be addressed in section 5.5 to draw forth the next chapter and elucidate the correlation between relational agency and relational constraints. This section will also serve as a transition from discussing relational agency to relational constraints, bridging the shift from Chapter 5 to Chapter 6.

Although silent agency is closely related to the relational constraints to be discussed in Chapter 6, the primary aim of this chapter is to classify and identify different types of relational agency in LBC's peer relationships. Children's silent agency is still regarded as one of these multiple types of relational agency in this chapter. The identification of different types of relational agency in this chapter is to address the first research question. Also, the strong connection between silent agency and relational constraints will be illustrated in section 5.5 below.

5.1 Active participation in peer interactions

Participant Anticipation was approximately fourteen to fifteen years old at the time of when interviews were conducted, and text messages were sent. She is a commuter who attends an urban public (junior) middle school. Both of her parents had migrated, and she is the only child in her family living with her maternal grandparents. After parental migration, Anticipation encountered an annoying boy in class who always treated her unfairly by bothering her and interrupting her study. Other girls in her class also experienced the same. Anticipation's and the other girls' interactions with this boy were considered very confrontational, with their *banzhuren*¹² (homeroom teacher) involved. Below is

¹² In Chinese characters: 班主任. It refers to homeroom teacher who is responsible for not just teaching, but liaising with educational officials in a school, and parents. A homeroom teacher in China is also responsible for student affairs of a fixed class (Dong and Xu, 2020).

an extract, labelled AT1, which shows Anticipation's active participation in handling unfair treatments at school:

Me: So, tell me about your peers in school or in your family.

Anticipation: There is a boy who is so annoying in my class. When he sits behind me, he bothers me a lot during classes. I could not even focus on my study anymore! I do not like him, sometimes I hate him. I also reported him to our *banzhuren*, and the *banzhuren* asked him to go to the office and have a conversation together. After a couple of conversations, I found that he could always get out of the teacher's office with a smile, even our *banzhuren* had asked him to stop acting like that.

Me: It sounds like he is a sophisticate. Maybe he knows how to avoid punishment?

Anticipation: Maybe, but when he is not acting like that, I think he is good.

Me: Oh good, not always conflicts. But I do not think the reporting is helpful either.

Anticipation: Yes. It is useless to report him over and over again, but I still choose to report him once I get very furious.

Me: I see. Anyone else that was bothered by him just like what he did to you?

Anticipation: Many other girls in our class. He keeps bothering us. We all reported him to the *banzhuren*. Sometimes, a few of us did it together.

Me: What else do you think that you can do next time?

Anticipation: I probably will ask our *banzhuren* to arrange him a "special seat"¹³ right next to the platform, so that he could not do any annoying things under the teachers' eyes¹⁴ ..."

Me: Genius!

(instant messages, March 2022)

Active participation is evident in extract AT1. Anticipation defended her right to study quietly in classroom based on the power of adult-led authority (Ryder, 2015) - the *banzhuren*'s power. Sometimes, the *banzhuren*, who is normally regarded as the authority in the class, helped her and her classmates¹⁵ (the other girls bothered by the same boy) to speak out, even it was not very helpful for Anticipation to completely change the current situation. Based on the first notion of viewing children's agency as active participation against adult power (Wyness, 2016; Wyness, 2018) as addressed in section 3.1 of Chapter 3, I consider that Anticipation was actively taking part in handling her unpleasant experience with the annoying boy in her class to try to impact the decision-making of the *banzhuren* or the authority. Anticipation was treated unfairly, as neither did the annoying boy nor the *banzhuren* protected her interests to study quietly in the classroom. Meanwhile, she was aware of whether her own interests were effectively protected or not. She also demonstrated the awareness of pursuing results through her active participation in dealing with social injustice encountered in the class by repeatedly reporting the boy to the *banzhuren*.

¹³ Usually, a special seat is for someone who is either recognised an 'underachiever', or 'troublemakers' in a classroom who could not focus on classes.

¹⁴ Under teachers' direct supervision. Teachers normally teach near the platform in a classroom.

¹⁵ She also has confirmed during interviews and text messages that their *banzhuren* had helped them sometimes.

Meanwhile, in our text messages, she also mentioned that she had conversations with the other girls who were bothered by the same boy in her class, which demonstrated her interest in taking part in bringing about changes in the adult-led context collectively with her peer classmates. She clearly knew how to reach out and seek help from peers instead of holding back. Moreover, all the girls, with Anticipation included, reported the boy jointly, which manifested Anticipation's awareness of the potency of collaborating with peers under such circumstances. Her active participation shows a sense of solidarity with these girls, which further embodies the collective culture within children's interpersonal relations in a Chinese school setting (Zhu, 2021b). Meanwhile, her collective sense of active participation suggests her dependence on the power of her peers in her pursuit of results when she was trying different ways to report the boy and get him punished by the *banzhuren*.

In summary, her relational agency with peers lies in: 1) her active participation in dealing with unequal peer treatment; 2) her organised active participation in solidarity with other girls who encountered the same unequal treatment as she did; 3) her dependence on the collective power of active participation with the other girls (or peers).

When comparing the above extract AT1 with extract CE below, Charlotte showed how effectively she solved similar problems solely by herself without borrowing any strength, neither from peers nor from adults.

Below is an extract from a face-to-face in-person focus group interview of Chloe and Charlotte conducted in September 2023. However, the following is more about Charlotte and her active participation in dealing with unequal encounters with her peer classmates. Below is the second half of the focus group which was labelled as CE, clearly demonstrating how tough Charlotte was when dealing with the unfair treatments from her peers in school:

Me: So, there are five of them (boys) who are very annoying and even the *banzhuren* could not come up with any plans to solve the problems caused by them?

Charlotte: Yes.

Me: Have you ever bothered by them?

Charlotte: Yes. Reporting to our *banzhuren* is useless and pointless. So, I just took a revenge by myself only when I was hit by them first. If they just curse me or do something softer, I just ignore them.

Me: You know how to defend yourself, very brave! How about their reactions?

Charlotte: I guess after knowing that I am an avenger, they rarely pick on me. I am a *mulaohu*¹⁶, ha-ha-ha.

Me: What an experience! Tell me more about your *mulaohu* experience please!

Charlotte: Well, I had a classmate when I was in kindergarten. Same happened and I took a revenge at that time. She has never spoken to me again. I found out that she enrolled in the same primary school as I did. Even now, she still does not dare to talk to me as my schoolmate. I often run into her in school, and she immediately runs away from me.

Me: I think you might be so proud of yourself because you rarely let them get in your way!

Charlotte: I am. Only when they pick on me first, will I take a revenge. I am not that type who would initiate any conflict.

(in-person interview, September 2023)

Compared with extract AT1, extract CE also revealed Charlotte's active participation in taking revenge when she was wrongly treated by some classmates, since adults' hands were tied in effectively solving such issues. It seems that the five boys in her class were not just bothering the girls but also bullying them, considering the physical alterations mentioned in extract CE. The same issue was also raised up by Chloe (in extract ET, addressed in section 6.3 of Chapter 6). However, Charlotte and Chloe had different reactions to the same social conflict involving the five boys. Chloe expressed more helplessness, while Charlotte showed more pride in her own successful experience of being tough on bullying in school.

Compared to Charlotte, Anticipation's active participation is more dependent and interdependent, while Charlotte's is more independent. Charlotte revealed a similar independent coping strategy from her kindergarten experience, demonstrating how her past experience shapes her current agency in peer relationships. I also argue that the reason why Charlotte did not collaborate with other peers in solving similar problems is that she was experienced. She knows what the most effective way is to end or reduce peers' unfair treatments in school.

Although it was not clear that whether *mulaohu* was a label that Charlotte's peers used to describe her or not, I did not expect that she used it to characterise herself. Charlotte described herself as a *mulaohu* with a victorious smile and a self-deprecating sense of humour, given that the traditional and conservative culture of Chinese society typically holds an expectation for women or girls to be obedient, gentle, or soft (Evans, 2010). At the same time, it seemed that she thought that she was defying the expectations or norms society has for females (Evans, 2010). Nonetheless, she did not care at all

¹⁶ In Chinese characters 母老虎. It means a tigress or a shrew. *Mulaohu* is considered as a negative description for women and girls used by sexists in Chinese society (Fu and Babcock, 2017).

when drawing on the extract, since she was proud of being brave and tough on her own to beat back peers who bullied or tried to bully her. Her active participation also showed a strong self-reliance or independence which seemed to be inconsistent with the traditional expectation for women in Chinese social norms.

Other than school, family is another context where active participation is exercised. Below is extract HN1, which was generated from an online face-to-face interview with Hayden. Hayden is the youngest child and the only left behind child in her family. She has an older sister who is a college student (aged over 18) studying in a nearby city, and she comes home for occasional visits. Their father migrated abroad, leaving Hayden and their paternal grandpa at home. The extract below (HN1) illustrates Hayden's confrontational interaction with her older sister in response to the unfair treatment that Hayden received from her:

Me: So, could you tell me about your daily encounters in both school and family?

Hayden: I have an older sister. I find myself fighting and quarrelling with her very often. She is a college student studying in another city, and she is nineteen years old. Even so, I bet that nine out of ten, she could not win a single quarrel or fight against me¹⁷. She is always the one who initiates a quarrel or a fight. Last time, she commanded me to use a basin to bring her hot water to wash her feet before sleep. She is not one of my parents. I refused to do so, and she was so pissed off. She stormed out of her room and said: are your wings full-fledged and getting harder¹⁸?

Me: I wonder who told you to confront your seniors when you think you are facing inequality or are asked to do something you do not want to do?

Hayden: Some 'brothers'¹⁹ from school. But they are not related by blood with me.

Me: Make sense. Did they help you in other circumstances?

Hayden: Once, a so called "friend" borrowed money from me. I did not even know how he knew that I had some money to lend. Perhaps it was because he knew that my dad is working abroad. He might have thought that people working abroad can get higher salaries, meaning that I would have more pocket money to spend than him. When I asked him (the lender) to pay me back, he refused. So, when some of my brothers heard about it, they retrieved the money from him on my behalf.

(online interview, March 2022)

Starting with her interaction with her older sister, Hayden experienced a sense of inequality (Bottero, 2019). She was subjected to unequal treatment within the family; thus she rejected the traditional rule of always respecting the elderly unconditionally in Chinese family norms (Tenenbaum et al., 2020). In other words, she declined to do something for her sister even though her sister is

¹⁷ She also had a satisfied smile on her face when she described her interaction with her older sister during the interview.

¹⁸ In Madarin *pinyin*: *chibang yingle*. In Chinese characters: 翅膀硬了. An idiom in Chinese which means someone is not only independent mentally but also no longer obeys seniors or other types of authority and seeks no advice from those who seem to be more experienced (Anon, 2017).

¹⁹ They are self-proclaimed brothers or sisters who are not related by blood. LBC were found to claim brothers and sisters in school to strengthen their friendships with others (Xiao, 2015b).

usually regarded as the senior one in the family. She actively took part in making her voice heard (James, 2007) by her sister. Furthermore, her agency in dealing with the peer relationship with her older sister can also be defined as her active participation (Wyness, 2018) in breaching certain traditional norms involving senior's authority in Chinese family. The reason for her disobedience in family was mainly what she was told by her peers, some self-proclaimed 'brothers' (in extract HN1 above) in school. They taught her that she should build up her strength so that people would not take advantage of her. They were also acting as her debt collectors, demonstrating how to effectively exert strength when coping with unfairness in peer relationships. Those brothers also won her trust in dealing with similar situations occurring elsewhere, such as at home.

She found that what the brothers had taught her was useful in dealing with the unequal treatment from her older sister within the family. She might have felt that she benefited from voicing herself, which she also was very proud of according to her tone of speaking during the interview. That might be the reason that she kept the words of the brothers in school in mind and applied them in the family context with her older sister. Hence, it is evident that children's agency is transferable across different social contexts. Combining the relevant argument that I made regarding extract CE above, Charlotte's current active participation was shaped by her past similar experiences in kindergarten. Therefore, I argue that children's relational agency acquired in the past with peers can exert an impact and shape their current peer relationships across different spaces and times. Their relational agency in coping with unfair treatments imposed by peers also endures over time.

In this section, the above three extracts showed children's active participation in confrontational situations in peer relationships in both school and family contexts. Regardless of the results of their exercise of this type of agency, it is evident that they were actively engaged in making themselves heard by adults, peers who initiated unfair treatments, and peers who had experienced similar unfairness. Sometime, their active participation is dependent on peers' power. They are also interdependent with and independent from peers when exercising active participation in peer interactions. Meanwhile, their active participation is shaped by their experience in the past and in other social contexts, across

different times and spaces.

In addition, their active participation demonstrates their opposition to specific social norms that involve prevalent expectations for girls and for younger individuals (both of whom are recognised as subordinate groups as addressed in section 3.2.3, 3.2.4, 3.3.1 and 3.3.4 of Chapter 3) in Chinese society. This also shows the linkage between their active participation and their ability to negotiate social norms, which will be illustrated later in section 7.2, Chapter 7.

5.2 Shifting perspectives in peer interactions and/or differentiating peer groups

In this section, I will draw on extracts JN, EC, CL and SH1 to unveil LBC's decisional social competence or ability in shifting perspectives in peer interactions and/or differentiating peer groups in non-confrontational social conditions.

Jason lives with his paternal grandparents and is separated from both of his parents since they got divorced and migrated respectively to different places. During our in-person interview, Jason (whose extract was labelled as JN) described what he had learnt from his school's educational practices regarding children's decision-making and school participation. He had learnt to shift perspectives and differentiating peer groups when he served as an interim class monitor:

Me: Are you a member of the class committee²⁰? Or, do you have any unique experiences when spending time with peers, either at school in your family?

Jason: I am the interim class monitor.

Me: So, are you going to help the *banzhuren* elect new monitors and other committee members?

Jason: No, we take turns to serve as the interim class monitor according to the rules of our class, and everyone gets the opportunity to be on the committee.

Me: Interesting. So, there is a rotational arrangement for the class committee?

Jason: Yeah, we have a different class monitor every week. This week, it is my turn.

Me: I see. How is your experience of serving as a class monitor on the committee?

Jason: I think I had learnt how to think from different perspectives and to put myself in other people's shoes.

Me: Sounds great! What brought you to reflect on your work and had such wonderful thought?

Jason: I was not aware of it until I became the class monitor. It is so difficult to manage the whole class on my own. There is hardly any effective cooperation between my classmates and me. It is because I am a novice. I think it is also not easy for other people.

Me: So far, how have you solved the problems that occurred as an interim class monitor?

Jason: I asked those (my peer classmates) who had experience for advice. I also asked our *banzhuren* to help me when the experienced peers could not help.

²⁰ The class committee system in Chinese schools differs from that of Western schools. The structure of the class committee and its relationships with the Communist Youth League, as well as the student members of the class, will be illustrated in section 6.4, Chapter 6.

Me: Could you give me some examples of the problems occurred?

Jason: For example, some of my classmates did not listen to me. Sometimes, teachers asked me to collect their homework and submit before a specific deadline, but they refused to give their homework to me on time. They were buying time to finish homework, I guess.

Me: It is good to know that you had learnt to shift your perspectives in your work at such a young age.

(in-person interview, September 2023)

Seeing things from other people's position helps Jason understand peers and then help himself out by making use of his social connections with both experienced peers and teachers in school. He never had any experience of being a member of the class committee before it was his turn to be the interim class monitor. When serving as an interim monitor, he had the opportunity to practice his relational agency by seeking help from others based on his judgement regarding his current working conditions. Jason also made judgement when he identified those peers who are more experienced, showing his ability to differentiate the experienced peers from his non-experienced peers. The sequence in which he sought help was his experienced peers and then their *banzhuren*, indicating that he prioritised peers when encountering peer-related problems occurred during his interim term.

His relational agency also showed a sense of dependence on adults as he also asked teachers for help. Even so, it was still his decision to seek help and fulfil his potential in monitoring the whole class, which involves peer interactions. Compared with Anticipation's experience illustrated in extract AT1 in section 5.1 above, both of them had a similar awareness of asking for help from the people, including peers and adults, around them to solve peer-related issues in school. Being aware of whom they could turn to for help is also regarded as a type of relational agency when the dependent aspect of their relational agency is shown. Such awareness also encompasses Jason's ability to distinguish between experienced peers and inexperienced peers, as well as between experienced peers and teachers who hold power and authority over all his peer classmates. It is also evident that he thought that, on some occasions, teachers could solve the problems more effectively than his experienced peers.

The rotation system established for class committees in this school, which aims to 'provide every child with the opportunity to become a leader'²¹, also promotes students' learning from peers when enabling them to gain leadership

²¹ It is the slogan of this school.

experience. Such a practice in this school also facilitates children's decisional agency in taking part in the class committee composed of students themselves. Thus, I argue that children can still practice their agency with peers within the adult-led institutional frameworks, when taking this school as an example. Meanwhile, the structure of Jason's agency practices lies in the rotation system set by teachers, which reflects adults' intervention in children's peer relationships (as discussed in section 2.5.3 of Chapter 2). It also reflects adults' impact on children's formation of relational agency in both peer relationships and school participation. Even though it is influenced by adults, relational agency can still be learnt from peers when Jason made use of peers' experiences and made related decisions to solve some problems as an interim class monitor.

When it came to his family social conditions, he said that he just could not understand why his parents got divorced. His parents' divorce still puzzles him from time to time and makes him unhappy. During the interview, he also disclosed that he prefers staying at school to staying at home, as socialising with peers at school makes him happier. Although it is evident that he cannot apply his relational agency in terms of shifting perspectives to understand his parents' divorce and adapt himself to it, the impact of peers on him is positive. It also sheds light on the impact of peers on LBC. Perhaps that is the reason why he prioritises the experienced peers in his class when dealing with problems that he cannot solve on his own as an interim class monitor, showing a sense of dependence of his relational agency in peer relationships.

In all, Jason can shift perspectives and differentiating among peer groups when serving as an interim class monitor. Adults' intervention, as a structural setting, seemed to be effective in Jason's practices of agency within peer relationships at school. His relational agency is also dependent on both experienced peers, and teachers who are the authoritarian figures.

Other than providing every child with the opportunity to become a leader, the school also advocates that educators should provide every child with the opportunity to become a talent. Other than students' academic talent, the school also values sports education to nurture children's talent in sports. The school frequently participates in sports competitions with other schools, organised by various levels of educational departments in China, and often wins awards.

Relevant school policies also engage pupils in sports activities formally and informally. That is why Eric (referred to as extract EC below) is always eager to play table tennis, even though he is not from the school team of table tennis. The extract EC below was generated from the focus group interview with Jason, Eric and Carl. In the extract, Eric shows how Eric shifted his perspectives and differentiating between peer groups during his leisure time at school when playing table tennis with peers:

Me: So, Eric and Carl, what is new with you two in school?

Eric: I will play table tennis with my friend from the school team today during lunch break.

Me: Interesting! Who is doing better in table tennis in your opinion?

Eric: Sometimes I win, sometimes he wins. So, overall, it is a tie. But I am not from the school team²².

Me: Your friend is still happy to play table tennis with you even you are not a team member?

Eric: Yes. So many people are into it in our school, but there is very limited space for us to play. Everyone is so energetic.

Me: How do you deal with it then?

Eric: Run very fast after lunch and occupy a table before many others!

Me: Do you share the workload of occupying a table with your friend from the school team?

Eric: No. But when he gets a table, he always offers me a place to play. Once, he failed to secure a spot and he also lost a few rounds²³ to me. I can feel that he was not happy. So, when finally, it was his turn to play again, I just lost to him for a few rounds on purpose and he immediately felt happier.

Me: So, do you think that by doing so, it would avoid contests or conflicts between you two?

Eric: Exactly. He probably would not blame me for staying too long and taking up the space that he is entitled to use as a school team player to practice. All in all, I am not from the school team. I will be offered a place to play by him when he gets a table, so it is better not to get on his bad side by any chance.

Me: Smart as you are! You know how to maintain a cordial relationship for the rainy days! Let me guess, do you have siblings?

Eric: I have a younger brother.

Me: Do you get along well with each other?

Eric: Yes, I like hanging out with him (showed an expression of contentment and happiness).

(in-person interview, September 2023)

From the extract EC, Eric had a judgement regarding the mutual benefit between himself and his friend from the school team of table tennis. That is, they can share the same table to play when the table cannot be booked in advance and is also not guaranteed according to the policy of using sports equipment during class breaks of this school. It can be argued that Eric's exercise of relational agency is a mediator to avoid potential social conflicts with peers, as he lost to his friend on purpose for a few rounds to ensure that he will be offered a place and be invited again by his friend when they play table tennis together. He knew that if he wins all the time, it would hurt his friend's feelings. Meanwhile, the friend holds the entitlement as an official school team player

²² It means he thought that he is not as professional as his friend in table tennis.

²³ According to Eric, their rule is the losers of several rounds in an odd number would immediately be replaced by other people in the queue, so that they can take turns to use the table.

who can also offers him a place to play table tennis, so being competitive would perhaps ruin the friendship and reduce the chances to play. Thus, Eric's relational agency shows his ability to shift perspectives as he concerned his friends' feelings in table tennis games and connected that with his chances to play in the future. Eric's perspective shifting contains his capacity to plan ahead to make current decisions with a long-lasting perspective in friendship maintenance. At the same time, Eric also differentiated peer groups as he said he would run very fast to get a table to play before many other peers, while he was less competitive when playing in games with his friend who's worth of helping him to secure a spot is distinctly recognised by him.

When asking about Eric's family social climates, he confirmed that he likes his little brother, showing familial harmony rather than conflicts or contests. Nonetheless, parenting style was not disclosed in extract EC, it has been proposed by other researchers that parent-child communications does impact LBC's social adaptation (Zhang et al., 2019). So, associating Eric's harmonious interaction with his younger brother with his agency in peer interactions in school, the reason why Eric was aware of others' social needs and emotions when fulfilling his own desire is perhaps the parenting style which had influenced him. Based on the above discussions, I also argue that Eric's relational agency in peer relationships lies in his ability to compromise by shifting his perspectives in friendship maintenance, and his capacity to differentiate peer groups by their worth to him.

Sophia is a day student from a rural middle (junior) school, living with paternal grandparents. She has a younger sister who used to be a LBC. Both of their parents migrated. Since March 2022 when the data collection just started, Sophia said that her younger sister had migrated with their parents to another city and was no longer a LBC. In the extract labelled as SH1 below, Sophia disclosed more about the reason why their parents only took her younger sister to migrate and left her behind. She also expressed her views from a parental perspective when interacting with her younger sister:

Sophia: I am quiet, and I always act in a good way. But my younger sister does not act like me at all. Our parents have expectations on us, but she always lets them down.

Me: Do you know why?

Sophia: I think it is because she used to hang out with gangsters in her school. She went to a middle (junior) school with a lower reputation before she migrated with our parents at the beginning of this semester. At that time when she still stayed at home with me, she

became a rebel against orthodoxy when both of our parents were away. She used to run away from home for a few days.

Me: What kind of parental expectations does she not fulfil?

Sophia: I will start with parental expectation on me. I specialise in guitar. Currently, I am focusing on gaining more professional certificates in guitar so that I can enter high school as an art-talented student. I aim to earn extra points on my NCEE²⁴ results as an art-talented student. My professional level in guitar constitutes a big part of my NCEE results. On the contrary, my sister already gave up on drawing after she began acting badly since then. She is also trying to enrol in an academic high school through the pathway for art-talented students. She was so gifted before she went to that school. Here are some of her nice drawings (showed some pictures on WeChat). Now, she totally wasted her talent in drawing. I think enrolling in an academic high school would be difficult for her. I have persuaded her to stop meeting with those bad guys a thousand times, but she just does not listen to me at all.

Me: So sad. Have your parents done any intervention for her?

Sophia: Our parents took her with them since this semester and migrated to another city trying to correct the bad behaviours that she got from the gangsters. I guess that is the parental intervention for her.

Me: Did it work?

Sophia: I do not know yet.

Me: Why does she not listen to you then? You are her older sister. I think she might have more to talk with you than with your parents.”

Sophia: I think maybe because how I persuaded her was exactly what our parents did for so many times. She felt my persuasion was possibly a twice-told story, and she was apparently bored with that. I do not know what else I can do to help her get back on the right track.

(instant messages, September 2022)

From Sophia's extract, she emphasised her concerns for her younger sister, which reflects their parents' concerns and expectations of her sister. It is evident that Sophia acted as a parent when persuading her sister and conveying her concerns to her younger sister like their parents. She must have learnt this norm of caring for the younger one in her family from their parents. According to her other text messages with me, she often gives her younger sister pocket money to spend, which is usually recognised as an act of elders in a Chinese family to demonstrate their care for youngsters who are under eighteen or still students (Ma et al., 2013). Thus, it is evident in the above-mentioned actions of Sophia that she shifted her perspectives when positioning herself as a parent-like role to her younger sister, despite being a child herself. Further discussions regarding family norms negotiation and justification in the extract SH1 will appear in section 7.1 of Chapter 7. The extract SH1 also suggested that parents' concerns about Sophia's younger sister have an impact on Sophia's agency in dealing with sistership, indicating adults' intervention and impact on children's peer relationships within family context.

²⁴ NCEE, or *gaokao* in Mandarin *pinyin*, refers to National College Entrance Examination in China (Davey et al., 2007). Gifted pupils could enjoy extra points so that they can get into better universities or colleges compared with the traditional pathway of only having their academic performance counted (Yang, 2004). Also, children's education is heavily valued by parents in China, and being left behind is not an exception of this type of parental expectation on their educational pathways (Hu, 2019).

Sophia was playing a role of a parent or a senior one in her family while interacting with her sister in the family. The elder child in a Chinese family usually is expected to take care of the younger ones (Freedman, 1970). A saying in ancient China also demonstrates this type of parent-child like sistership involving childrearing norms: the eldest brother in a family must take care of the younger ones just like a father, and his wife must play the maternal role²⁵. So, it is not difficult to understand that why Sophia viewed herself as a senior in her family, who is also entitled to give a speech and educate her sister like her parents. However, her practice of agency in the sistership maintenance tends to be ineffective in persuading her sisters, since she could not get the positive results, she had expected for her sister. Meanwhile, she also could not avoid the familial social norms of education (Chan, 2009) advocated by their parents when persuading her sister, which also seemed ineffective.

Sophia also admitted that her attempts to help her sister were ineffective. She also failed to develop a specific plan to address this issue. However, her persuasion imitating their parents regarding her younger sister's prospect can also be understood as her relational agency in the sistership. She also made a judgement based on the outcome of her persuasion, which is also seen as her practice of relational agency in peer relationships. As her relational agency was evidently constrained by their parents' prior unsuccessful experience of childrearing practices, Sophia's relational agency with peers was considered as being dependent on their parents. Further discussion on the constraints imposed on Sophia's relational agency in the sistership will be addressed in section 6.1 of Chapter 6.

When mentioning siblings in the focus group interview with Jason, Eric and Carl, I turned to Carl and asked his experience in socialising with peers in family. However, he has a totally different experience from Eric, who demonstrates love for his younger brother. The following extract from the focus group interview, primarily featuring Carl (labelled as CL), shows how he differentiated between peer groups in family and school settings:

Me: How about you Carl?

Carl: I have a younger sister.

Me: Do you like her?

Carl: Not at all.

²⁵ In Mandarin *pinyin*: *zhangxiong weifu*, *zhangsao weimu*. In Chinese characters: 长兄为父, 长嫂为母. It originated from Mencius wisdom recorded in the book titled as *Kui Dao* 《跬道》 (Mencius, 2002).

Me: Why?

Carl: I cannot tell. I just do not like her. I do not hang out with her after I finish my homework.

Me: Who would you like to hang out with then?

Carl: My neighbour. I would rather spend my leisure time with him.

Me: Are you good friends in school (asking Carl and Eric)²⁶?

Carl: Yes.

Eric: Yes.

Me: Do you spend time together after school?

Carl: No, we normally do not.

Eric: No.

Me: So, you just hang out with different people at different places?

Carl: I guess so.

Eric: (Agreed in silence).

(in-person interview, September 2023)

From the extract CL, it is distinct that Carl has the agency to differentiate peer groups in different social contexts as he interacted with different peers in different contexts. Somehow, Carl did not reveal more about why he treats his younger sister differently than other peers. Carl did not seem happy to continue this topic, so I changed the topic in the interview. However, from the limited information that shared by Carl, his relational agency lies in classifying peers into different groups according to the specific social contexts.

The extract CL can be linked with section 5.3 below regarding viewing children's relational agency with peers as their ability to create, use and order certain criteria (Evaldsson, 2007; Valentine, 2011) to label or categorise peers based on their impressions on their peers. Children's ability to differentiate peer groups must be based on their decisional criteria for different peers, but the extract CL did not show further details of such criteria. Thus, relevant discussion will be unveiled in section 5.3.

In all, children are capable of shifting perspectives and/or differentiating peer groups when socialising with peers in both family and school settings. Also, their ability to shift perspectives and differentiate peer groups lies in their judgment of peers' experience or worth. They also demonstrated their ability to imitate parents when shifting from a peer perspective to a parent-like perspective in familial relationships, such as sistership. Additionally, they can differentiate peer groups based on different social contexts.

²⁶ I was asking both Eric and Carl here.

5.3 Criteria making, using and ordering for friend selection and categorisation

Another type of children's tangible agency in peer relationship is conceptualised as their competence or ability to create and/or use certain criteria to label and/or categorise their peers, demonstrating their decision-making ability in peer interactions.

Pangolin was a commuter when studying at his junior middle school. Later, he became a boarder after moving to a high school with high reputation. His parents got divorced. During the data collection period, the left-behind family was expecting a baby as Pangolin's father remarried. He currently lives with his paternal grandparents and his stepmother, after his father migrated. I conducted one online face-to-face interview with him and sent him some text messages when he was still attending junior middle school. When comparing the data collected from him before and after he entered high school, he talked more about his family beforehand but focused more on his various peers afterward. His peer interactions in high school have become markedly more dynamic and enriching compared to those in junior middle school. The extract PG1 below was taken from Pangolin's text messages, which shows how he used internet buzzwords to categorise peers after entering high school:

Me: How do you feel about the academic workload in high school?

Pangolin: After I entered high school this September, I felt a lot of academic pressure compared to that in junior middle school.

Me: How do you adapt yourself to it? How do your classmates deal with it?

Pangolin: In this high school, so many classmates are doing better than me. There are many *juanwang*²⁷ in my class and many *xueba*²⁸ as well. Some *juanwang* even have five times of notes than I have! Some *xueba* sleep all the time during classes but always get good grades!

Me: Sounds like a totally different world from your junior middle school. How do you position yourself among them?

Pangolin: I guess I am a very *foxi*²⁹ person, and I am a *bailianwang*³⁰ compared to them. I think my pressure does not directly come from any individual. I know there are many things that I need to learn to prepare for the NCEE. I just want to follow my own course under the pressure that everyone might have. I would never compete with any of them. I also want to do my best at the same time, but let the destiny take care of the rest. For the rest of the time, I just want to enjoy high school.

Me: Good. In a highly competitive social environment, people seem to forget that they need to relax and enjoy the moment as well.

²⁷ In Chinese characters: 卷王, a popular internet buzzword in China which refers to someone who is a strike-breaker or overachiever, and who always takes part in the involution of an industry or a common cause which often creates cutthroat competition (Zhen, 2021).

²⁸ In Chinese characters: 学霸, another popular buzzword in China. It refers to someone who is a top student but also an academic overachiever (Xiao and Qian, 2020).

²⁹ An internet buzzword and an adjective manifesting people who have calm mindset and normally refuse competitions in Chinese society (Xiao, 2021).

³⁰ In Chinese characters 百炼王.

Pangolin: I think so.

(instant messages, September 2022)

Based on the existing internet buzzwords, Pangolin was able to label and categorise peer classmates based on his judgements regarding the differences between himself and his classmates. He also created *bailianwang*, a new word based on these internet buzzwords from Chinese netizens to differentiate himself from his peers when interacting with them. Other than a *foxi* mindset as mentioned in the extract, he also tried to describe himself as someone who experienced hardship but cannot be defeated when using the word *bailianwang*. A *bailianwang* has strong hearts, but also has a Buddha-like mindset when facing overwhelming situations according to his own descriptions. Compared to Carl who cannot say anything about why he has differentiated peer groups to socialise with, Pangolin disclosed more details regarding why he classified his peers into several types of people when drawing on the societal phenomenon of *neijuan* in Chinese education (Li, 2021). Being a person with Buddha-like mindset itself is an agency that prevents Pangolin from being influenced and driven by competitive peers to take part in peer competitions in school.

In relation to *juanwang* as mentioned in the extract, there is another popular internet buzzword in China which can best state the phenomenon of partaking in competitions regardless of taking personal health, meaningful and positive personal development into consideration: involution, in Mandarin pin yin: *neijuan*³¹ (Huang, 2023). Like what was mentioned by Pangolin, a *juanwang* is recognised as a person who does the most in internal competitions of an institution. Studies also suggest that Chinese people, including children (Li, 2021), are often engaged in meaningless competitions of making more efforts but gaining less (Huang, 2023). This ubiquitous societal phenomenon is reflected in China's exam-oriented education (Li, 2021) multiple reactions of Pangolin's classmates to it, as they either were described as a *juanwang* or a *xueba* by Pangolin. Pangolin's awareness of his peers' reactions to the involution in education is also seen as his agency to the exam-oriented structural setting in school involving high academic pressure. When taking a relational approach, Pangolin also situated his agency in the educational structure related criteria that were mentioned above.

³¹ In Chinese characters: 内卷.

Furthermore, as mentioned in the extract PG1, it is evident that Pangolin viewed these criteria as a reference to get along with his peers. Somehow, he also used these criteria to clarify his opinions on NCEE and his perception of the potential peer competition in high school.

As Pangolin mentioned that he does not want to fully submerge his high school life in study and endless tests involving high academic pressure, but still want to spare some time to enjoy his high school life. So, I asked him further about how his current school life is. The extract PG2 below details his response to this question, outlining how he created and ordered his criteria for choosing a girlfriend:

Me: Can you tell me more about your high school life?

Pangolin: I am a boarder now. I have very funny roommates. They were playing Truth or Dare the other day. They asked me to take part in.

Me: What did you choose in this game?

Pangolin: I chose to dare and confess my love to a girl in my class.

Me: Wow! What happened then?

Pangolin: The girl said yes, and we are a couple now.

Me: Ha-ha, I should say congratulations to you if you know how to balance your love life and study at school, as it is still not encouraged by most of schoolteachers and even parents. But always dare to dare! Could you describe your girlfriend in your own words.

Pangolin: Thanks. Yes, it is not encouraged and we hid it from our teachers as they always prioritise our study³². I think, she 1) is sweet; and she 2) has a gentle soul. We 3) share the same worldviews; and 4) she does nice things for me.

Me: Are these also your general criteria for choosing a partner?

Pangolin: Yes.

Me: Please order your criteria that you have just mentioned. I wondered which criterion you would prioritise when choosing a partner.

Pangolin: 4), 3), 1), 2).

(instant messages, September 2022)

Interestingly, Pangolin knew how to organise his personal criteria for choosing a girlfriend which he previously listed, without hesitation. When drawing on the extract PG1 above, he pictured himself as a relatively disadvantaged high schooler facing his more advantaged peers who seemed to be better than him in doing academic work. In extract PG2, when he was not in a disadvantaged situation, he was also competent to make his own decisions in his social life in school. Similarly, Pangolin had multiple criteria for choosing a partner in extract PG2, just like how he did when categorising and differentiating other peers in extract PG1.

The differences between his criteria-related agency practices with peers as addressed respectively in the two extracts lie in whether he had demonstrated

³² Pangolin and his girlfriend have adopted some techniques to try to hide their romantic relationship from their teachers, which will be disclosed in Chapter 7 regarding normativity negotiation and justification of related social behaviours.

his capacity to order these criteria or not. Organising criteria by giving them an order is seen as Pangolin's agency in prioritising certain personal traits when making his own decisions regarding choosing a partner. I also argue that prioritising things and putting them in an order shows children's potential to tackle urgent issues in life. He was also using the criteria that he listed to see whether someone can meet them all, which is his ability to make a judgement when dealing with interpersonal relationships with peers in school.

According to his other text messages, he did not initiate the game called Truth or Dare. However, he immediately sensed the peer competition in this game by addressing that another boy involved in the game lost the game. The boy also confessed his love to another girl, but he was rejected. The girl even refused to be a normal friend with him. He sighed every day since then in his dorm.

Meanwhile, Pangolin tended to be very proud of being the ultimate winner of the game, compared to the other boy's similar but failed attempt. When drawing on both extracts (PG1 and PG2), it is evident that even Pangolin did not like the competitive atmosphere in school as addressed in extract PG1, he still wanted to win when competing with peers on some occasions as illustrated in extract PG2. Hence, I argue that his Buddha-like mindset seems to be the personality that he is currently pursuing, rather than what he fully possesses. A study also suggested that children who are imaginative tend to have better coping skills and the ability to regulate their emotions and tend to achieve well in thinking, logic, and communication (Smith and Mathur, 2009). Picturing an ideal personality for himself to pursue showed his self-perceived or imagined social competence, indicating his potentials, as well as relational agency, for peer interactions.

A few months later, when I came to do some follow-ups on WeChat, he also shared that his girlfriend broke up with him as she just treated him as a backup of another boy who just transferred to the same school that three of them are attending. It turned out that the boy was his ex-girlfriend's old crush in junior high school. So, his imagined competence might lack an overall understanding of the current realistic social conditions with peers. Nevertheless, he effectively showcased his agency which aligns with his criteria-related social actions: making, using and ordering criteria. All these actions demonstrate a pronounced dynamism of his relational agency.

The extract SH below was generated from Sophia and Hayden's focus group interview. The two girls used another internet buzzword to classify peer groups and to characterise one another, which was similar to what Pangolin did as addressed in extract PG1 above. Along with the buzzword used, extract SH below also highlights other criteria mentioned by the two girls regarding an unavailable boy, demonstrating their relational agency in creating and applying criteria for another peer who is not involved in this friendship:

Me: Who you want to make friends with (asking both)?

Sophia: I think I want to make friends with those who have a sense of humour and who always crack some jokes and make people laugh. Those are called *doubi*³³. I think I am a *doubi*, so my friends are all *doubi*.

Hayden: She is funny. When we hang out together, everything can be so funny because of her.

Sophia: Yes, for example, last time, Hayden had a crush on a boy...

Hayden: Oh no, do not say that, please. It was so awkward.

Sophia: It is ok, it is just for fun. So, I directly went to the boy and asked him to show me the code of his WeChat account when pointing at Hayden and said: "my friend wants to make friends with you, and I will ask her to send you a friend request on WeChat". Then, he said OK, and showed me his WeChat QR code. I scanned it and referred him to Hayden. However, it turned out that the boy already has a girlfriend.

Hayden: Yes, he has, but we can still be friends, or become brother and sister³⁴. I think this guy is nice as he did not hide the truth that he has a girlfriend when other girls approached him. He was also very polite when turning other girls down.

Sophia: Oh boy, this is funny. I even did not ask him "are you available" before I asked for his WeChat!

Hayden: You just did what a *doubi* could do.

Sophia: Haha...

(online interview, April 2022)

It is evident in extract SH that the criteria of the two girls for making friends are as follows: 1) people who are humorous, or people who can have fun together; 2) people who say things straightforwardly and do not hide anything from others; 3) people who are polite; and 4) people who still want to make friends with others even they are in romantic relationships³⁵. They both have the capacity to generate criteria when making friends. They also defined their peers by using the criteria listed above.

Being a *doubi* is the criterion that Sophia and Hayden both learnt from online buzzwords and applied to their daily interactions as friends. Sophia thought that her friend Hayden used *doubi* to describe her is acceptable regarding her reaction to Hayden's comment, as addressed in extract SH above. Although being a compliment commonly used among close friends, *doubi* is also a

³³ Another internet buzzword, in Chinese characters 逗比. Literally, it means a funny idiot, and sometimes it is a compliment among close friends (Wang, 2018).

³⁴ As mentioned in the extract HN1 in section 5.1 in the above, these are self-proclaimed brothers and sisters.

³⁵ In contemporary Chinese society, individuals in exclusive heterosexual relationships often maintain a certain distance from members of the opposite gender, particularly in the context of friendships (Liu, 2006; Liang et al., 2017).

friendly insult (Wang, 2018) depending on the context of conversations. However, Sophia did not consider it as an insult which contains depreciation, as she was in a good mood during the interview. *Doubi* also refers to someone who is not taking things very seriously (Wang, 2018) and with a sense of humour. Sophia seemed to have the fun of being a *doubi*. In addition, Hayden did not treat the *doubi* criterion as an insult as well. It seems that Hayden considered Sophia as a close friend who can share a few stories for fun in front of three of us when I was considered as an outsider of their friendship. To an extent, Hayden's relational agency is enduring a *doubi* friend in front of a stranger like me as Hayden also tried to stop the conversation regarding the unavailable boy. Both Sophia and Hayden seemed happy and had fun together as *doubi*. Their relational agency is reinforced through the recognition of other people who are also *doubi*, just like themselves.

Resonating with the *doubi* mindset, Pangolin also has multiple descriptions for his competitive peers when using certain criteria after he entered high school and became a boarder. Pangolin's *foxi* mindset somehow is very close to a *doubi* mindset regarding positive attitudes toward life (Wang, 2018; Xiao, 2021): enjoying the moment rather than worrying about the intangible future. It is interesting to see, how these positive mindsets are growing on LBC when they socialise with peers, rather than emphasising only on the impact of parental migration on their living stress towards future (Zhao et al., 2018). In addition, Pangolin, Sophia and Hayden they all have the ability to identify and adopt an optimistic trait when socialising with peers, which is also seen as their relational agency in peer relationships.

This extract SH in the above is all I know about the details of the unavailable boy. Although the context was limited, there were certain criteria for the unavailable boy mentioned by Sophia and Hayden. For example, being polite when turning other girls down.

With both parents having migrated, Hazel is currently living with her younger sister and paternal grandfather. She is a commuter at a junior middle school. The extract HL1 below was from the text messages between Hazel and I the other day when we mentioned about how to overcome the awkwardness of reconnecting with a long-lost friend. Hazel also revealed some of her friend selection criteria, as illustrated in the extract below (HL1):

Hazel: I used to have a good friend, but we have not seen each other since the second year of junior middle school. Do you think it would be awkward if we meet again? She will come back soon from a special school. She was sent to a special school by her mum. She is often referred to by adults as a type of children who are “not good at studying”.

Me: So, are you concerned about feeling awkward with her, or is it because of her being labelled as “not good at studying”, and your parents do not want you to associate with her again?

Hazel: I am concerned about feeling awkward with her. I am also this type of children who are “not good at studying”, anyway.

Me: But studying is not the only path to pursue your future career.

Hazel: But you cannot deny that it is the best one. I know she smokes, drinks, often loafs around outside of school. She also suffers from depression.

Me: So, what do you think you like about her?

Hazel: I appreciate her honesty, straightforwardness, and trust in friends. There is so much more; I cannot put it all into words.

Me: I am glad to see that you have your own judgements, instead of merely relying on adults' judgements or even criticism about her. While she may have some habits that are not so good for herself, it does not stop us from recognising her good characters. Sometimes, people are complex and multifaceted; you already knew it at such a young age!

Hazel: Yes. No matter whether she has changed or not, I have always liked her as a friend. I think I will meet her anyway.

(instant messages, April 2023)

Hazel demonstrated her insights into two different types of personal traits in her friend: negative traits or challenges and positive traits or virtues. The negative ones include habits and behaviours such as smoking, drinking, loafing around outside of school, and struggling with depression, which are often viewed negatively or as problematic by the Chinese society when referring to a child (Fong, 2006). The positive ones include the friend's qualities like honesty, straightforwardness, and trust in friendships, which Hazel deeply valued and appreciated in her friend despite the other challenges that the friend faces. Both the negative and positive sides of the friend are Hazel's criteria.

It is evident from the extract that Hazel prioritised the potential awkwardness of meeting this long-lost friend over the concern of being caught by her parents when meeting her again. Hazel's decision regarding her relationship with her friend was based on her observation of her friend's good heart and how her friend treated her, rather than on how others, particularly adults, might portray her friend and judge Hazel's reconnection with her. It is evident that Hazel is competent in making her own decisions about friend selection, based on her own judgment and certain criteria, under circumstances largely free from adult interference. Her insights into the two types of seemingly contradictory personal traits also demonstrate her ability to understand the complexities of human nature, recognising that both negative and positive traits can coexist in a single individual.

Meanwhile, Hazel also labelled herself as those children who are ‘not good at studying’ (in the extract HL1) just like her friend, which perhaps the reason why she showed an accepting and understanding attitude toward some of her friend’s seemingly less favourable traits or habits. Since Hazel also received this label, it might make both Hazel and her friend feel that they essentially belong to the same group. This might be the reason why Hazel wanted to continue staying in touch with her friend. Later, from Hazel’s post on WeChat Moments, she eventually met up with this girl, demonstrating how Hazel disregarded the criteria, judgments, and criticisms imposed by adults while forming friendship.

As mentioned in the literature review, Chinese parents often interfere children’s friend selection (Zhu, 2020b), as the interactions between children and these peers with negative traits and habits may appear potentially risky (Fong, 2006). Chinese parents typically would not approve of their children associating with them, fearing that they might be negatively influenced (Ren and Edwards, 2015). It is also evident in the extract SH1 mentioned in section 5.3, as Sophia’s parents also intervened Sophia’s younger sister’s interactions with some gangsters. While adults who intervene in children’s choice of friends have the intention of protecting them (Zhu, 2020b), creating the criterion of “not good at studying” is something worth reflecting on for adults since it is often associated with the negative traits mentioned in the extract HL1. So, I argue that for children like Hazel and her friend, who are labelled as “not good at studying” or even worse by adults, they are somewhat judged by adults with a denial of their academic performance or even their personal traits but ultimately come together as a result of adults’ criticism.

To summarise, LBC were found to be able to acquire criteria from the internet and apply them directly in their peer interactions. They used existing buzzwords as their criteria for the decision-making of peer relationship maintenance, which is considered as a unique type of relational agency in this research. They also practice their relational agency with peers by ordering certain criteria based on the criteria that they previously created. These criteria also demonstrated LBC’s ability to differentiate peer groups and peers’ distinct personal traits. Some criteria, such as being a *doubi*, also constituted as their decision-making in friend selection.

Additionally, Hayden's other criteria regarding her silent agency in peer relationship maintenance in school, which will be presented in section 5.4 below, relate with her rejection to toxic friendships.

5.4 Silent agency in peer interactions

Listening to children's authentic voices involves listening to their silences (Lewis, 2010; Spyrou, 2016). Silent agency is also viewed as children's intangible agency in this research, compared to other different types of tangible agency as addressed in sections 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3 above. When exploring the reasons for children's silenced yet agentic social ability in peer relationships, more efforts are exerted.

Hayden was one of the participants that mentioned in section 5.1 above. When socialising with her older sister, who valued birth orders and her seniority in the family and often tried to ask Hayden to provide her with convenience, Hayden demonstrated her active participation in dealing with such unequal encounters in the family. She also mentioned her self-proclaimed brothers in extracts HN1 in section 5.1, showing the positive and constructive peer interactions in school between these supportive brothers and her. These brothers taught her to say no to injustice in life that encountered. However, it seems that peer relationship in school to Hayden does not always associate with being supportive to one another. The extract below (HN2) is an example of how Hayden silently distanced herself from a gossip and a money borrower who refused to repay:

Me: It seems that you have got many brothers and sisters ³⁶in school. How is your interaction with them lately?

Hayden: Some are good, some are not.

Me: Tell me more if you would like to share why some of them are not good for you. I still remember that you mentioned earlier about some of the brothers who taught you to confront others when encountering unfair treatments. They are good for you. How about the bad ones?

Hayden: There is a girl who used to be nice and friendly. She is not from my class. She is my senior in school.

Me: How did you become friends?

Hayden: She came to me first and claimed me as her younger sister.

Me: This is a very popular way of making friends in your school, I guess? Such a big family over there!

Hayden: I think so. She also claimed a few other girls as younger sisters from my class. Later, I just stop hanging out with her because I heard that she gossiped about me around. She was saying something ridiculous.

Me: Oh, that is bad. Maybe she thought you would not know anything about it. How come! Gossips are everywhere unless you never speak about anyone.

Hayden: Exactly. As I told you last time, some other so-called friends borrowed money from me. But it turned out that they were just delinquent borrowers. They were so obsequious

³⁶ Addressed in the footnote in the extract HN1.

and flattering when they wanted money from me. When I asked them to pay me back, they ignored my request in a very arrogant way, just like performing the face-changing act in Sichuan Opera.

Me: So, you stop hanging out with them?

Hayden: Yes. I blocked them all on WeChat and stayed away.

Me: Meaningless and toxic relationships, aren't they?

Hayden: Yeah. I just want some inner peace, not drama. It is not like I care money a lot. I think these people are not good and also not genuine.

(instant messages, September 2022)

From extract HN2, it is evident that Hayden's silent agency lies in cutting ties with the gossip and the debtor. Her silent agency is based on some of her criteria to make friends and differentiate peers in school. These criteria include: 1) being genuine; 2) being a trustworthy person when fulfilling financial obligations. It seems that Hayden did things appear to be inactive to those who did not meet the two criteria that listed above, as she did not confront these people like how she did when encountering unequal treatment in family made by her older sister. But it is just the inactiveness demonstrated her silent agency in a way of rejecting toxic friendships solely from her end. Hayden's awareness and competence to differentiate good and bad ones to make friends within school also constituted as her silent agency to those who seemed to be not as righteous as her self-proclaimed brothers.

As illustrated in section 5.1, it is evident that her active participation was taught by these brothers and she applied what she learnt from them to her older sister related by blood to resist to conform to the traditional social norm that emphasises deference to seniors in her family. However, it seems that her agency in dealing with her relationships with these disloyal, and unreliable peers mentioned in extract HN2 appears to be inactive in terms of her confrontational reactions at home. Thus, I asked her the reason why she did not confront with these peers in school. The below extract HN3 shows the reason why she had different reactions to similar unfairness in peer relationships that she encountered respectively in school and family:

Me: Why did you not voice yourself in front of the people that you just mentioned? It is different from what you did to your older sister at home, I guess.

Hayden: They are *wairen*³⁷, not family. It is ok to just walk away from them and let them go, but family is different.

(instant messages, September 2022)

The context for her silent agency practices was school, rather than family.

³⁷ *Wairen*, in Chinese characters: 外人, which literally means people other than family members. By categorising family members and *wairen*, Chinese people usually express their sense of distance in interpersonal relationships (Luo, 2008; Du et al., 2022).

Meanwhile, the context for her active participation was family, but not school. She did not show active participation in school either in the interaction with the gossip or with the debtor. Rather, she demonstrated silences more than active participation in dealing with the unfairness encountered in school. She might regard school as the context where she can learn about active participation, but not the context for realistic practices of that with peers. On the contrary, she might regard family as the context where she can practice active participation, but not the context for learning that. Thus, family is considered as the comfortable and safer territory for her to practice her confrontational agency, such as active participation, in peer relations, but school is temporarily not. Although her active participation was transferrable across different social contexts as discussed in section 5.1, she might only practice her active participation in and transfer active participation to a context where she feels more comfortable and safer, such as in family. Thus, I argue that her active participation might only exist in the family context with her older sister.

Meanwhile, as school is perhaps considered as a place that everyone should be more cautious and thoughtful compared to family, which is a more relaxed social space. Hayden prioritised silences over confrontations at school so that she can also prevent herself from getting into trouble when socialising with peers in school. After all, these peers in school who are relatively unfamiliar individuals to her, are not as close as family as addressed in extract HN3. Interestingly, her silent agency did not transfer from school to family in terms of dealing with peer relationships. It can be argued that she knows family members would not leave her only because of her confrontational behaviours and disobedience to her older sister. Despite being active within the family yet remaining silent at school, it is also evident in extract HN3 that she can exercise her relational agency considering varying social contexts and the nature of her relationships with different peer groups. The comparison between her active participation and silent agency shows her ability to differentiate social contexts and peer relationships when practising agency with peers.

So far, it is evident in this chapter that LBC's silent agency relates to their criteria of friend rejection and associates with their perception of the social contexts and the nature of peer relationships involved. In Chapter 6, more manifestations of LBC's silent agency, which involves both peers and adults in

family and school, will be presented, thereby demonstrating more reasons why they remain silent despite being aware of others' manipulation.

5.5 Discussions: the interconnections between different types of relational agency and the evidence of relational constraints

As discussed in the sections above, four major types of relational agency of LBC in their peer relationships were evident. Anticipation's active participation as addressed in extract AT1 appeared to be dependent on peers, which is similar to Sophia's ability to shift perspectives when socialising with her younger sister. In section 5.3, among these different criteria identified by Pangolin, Sophia and Hayden, LBC's ability to differentiate peers based on their own criteria was also evident. In addition, Hayden's demonstration of her silent agency was associated with her criteria for friend rejection. All the discussions above showed the interconnection between different types of children's relational agency in peer relationships. Meanwhile, both Sophia and Hayden demonstrated more than one type of relational agency with peers, showing the diversity of agency demonstrated by an individual.

As addressed in extract AT1 and CE in section 5.1, adults were unable to make a difference when children like Anticipation and Charlotte reported peers' unfair treatments. After voicing themselves in the presence of adults, they both achieved undesirable outcomes as both of their *banzhuren* seemed to be tolerant to these annoying boys in school. Adult's authority appeared to be powerless particularly in Anticipation's situation of dealing with unfair social encounters, which further constrained her agency with peers. Although being tough on her own, Charlotte still endured the five boys from time to time. When drawing on extract SH1 from section 5.2, Sophia's relational agency was constrained by adults within the social structure established by her parents, as her ineffective efforts to influence her younger sister were in a manner which was similar to their parents'. However, teachers' role was also found to be effective in facilitating children's agency in peer relationships through the rotation system of the class committee, as shown in extract JN. Aligning with my assumptions about adults' impact on children's social lives and their relational agency in peer relationships, as discussed in section 3.1.4 and 3.2.5 of Chapter 3, most of the above-mentioned extracts illustrated the constraints imposed by adults on children's relational agency in peer relationships.

Also, as discussed in section 5.1 above, when Anticipation, Charlotte and Hayden were in confrontational stances to cope with unfair treatments made by peers, peers' constraints imposed on them were evident. In Hayden's illustration of silent agency in section 5.4, the gossip and the debtor's breaches of enduring friendships with Hayden are also considered as peer-imposed constraints as Hayden had to cut them off due to their ingenuine and untrustworthy actions. Although coping strategies were diverse when navigating the constraints imposed by peers, it appears that their agency was equally shaped by these constraints, rendering their actions more of a response to necessity than a true exercise of autonomy. Thus, similar to adult-imposed constraints, peer-imposed constraints also impact LBC's relational agency in peer relationships.

However, as the focus of this chapter is on identifying different types of LBCs' relational agency, the relational constraints imposed by both peers and adults, evident in the extracts discussed above will be revisited in detail in the next chapter (Chapter 6), alongside with additional new extracts. The focus of Chapter 6 will be on the different relational constraints imposed by both LBC's peers and adults in shaping LBC's relational agency in peer relationships.

Chapter 6 Identifying relational constraints imposed by LBC's peers and the adults involved in LBC's peer relationships

As conceptualised in sections 3.1.3, 3.1.4, 3.2.5, 3.3.1, 3.3.2, and 3.3.4 of Chapter 3, relational constraints can be imposed by others, including both LBCs' peers and adults, demonstrating the impact of others on LBCs' relational agency in peer relationships. Although adults remain dominant in shaping children's relational agency by imposing constraints, as discussed in section 3.1.4, I also argued that LBCs' peers are equally capable of imposing constraints on them, much like adults do. Constraints are also a reason for children's silences, as addressed in section 3.1.3 of Chapter 3. These constraints become relational when situating children's agency within their social relationships, as illustrated in section 3.1.4. Furthermore, as highlighted in section 3.2.5 and 3.3.4, a sense of social inequality often emerges when incorporating agency-related concepts from sociology into the construction of the theoretical framework. Relational constraints also connect with the notion of normativity negotiation and justification, as social norms can function as relational constraints, as conceptualised in sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2. Thus, in identifying different types of relational constraints imposed by others in LBC's peer relationships in this chapter, the discussion below will also focus on the reasons behind children's silences and norms that constrain, hinder and shape their practices of relational agency in peer relationships.

Table 6.1 New extracts involved in Chapter 6

No.	Pseudonym	Extract label	Location
1	Hazel	HL2	section 6.1
2	Hazel	HL3	
3	Weiai	WA1	
4	Amy	AM	section 6.2
5	Chole and Charlotte	ET	section 6.3
6	Aubrey	AU1	section 6.4
7	Aubrey	AU2	

Source: data collected by the researcher herself

In this chapter, I will use seven new interview extracts, as listed in Table 6.1 above. In fact, in Chapter 5, multiple relational constraints were already evident. However, since the focus of Chapter 5 is on the multiple dimensions of LBC's relational agency, relational constraints in Chapter 5 were not extensively

addressed. Thus, other than the seven new extracts utilised in this chapter, I will also revisit three extracts appeared in section 5.1, Chapter 5: AT1 from Anticipation, CE from Charlotte, and HN1 from Hayden. They will be cross-referenced below in the relevant discussions. In total, this chapter involves ten extracts.

Meanwhile, as discussed in section 3.1 and 3.2 of Chapter 3, agency is often paired with constraints in prior debates from both the sociology of childhood and sociology, indicating that the two concepts can be discussed simultaneously. However, as the focus of this chapter is on identifying different types of relational constraints imposed by others, LBC's relational agency will first be explored to lay the foundation for understanding these imposed constraints. This approach also signifies the strong interconnection between relational agency and relational constraints, reflecting my assumption outlined in Chapter 3 regarding the conceptualisation of relational constraints. Further discussions about such interconnection will also be further discussed in section 6.5 below, demonstrating its connection to the notion of normativity negotiation and justification.

To be specific, section 6.1 will present a comparison between LBCs' agentic social interactions with peers in school and their constrained agency within the family. Through this contrast, relational constraints can be easily identified. Section 6.2 will provide evidence of relational constraints within the family context, particularly through LBCs' reasons for remaining silent. Section 6.3 will illustrate LBCs' agentic interactions with peers under the authority and powerful constraints imposed by adults in school. Finally, section 6.4 will highlight evidence that such authoritarian positions and power constraints imposed by adults in school are sometimes non-verbal and are embedded within an adult-led system involving both LBC and their classmates, known as the class committee. In section 6.5, not just the interconnection between relational agency and relational constraints, children's silences will also be further explored in an overall discussion. Additionally, the evidence of social norms, as they emerge from the above-mentioned sections in the identification of relational constraints in this chapter, will also be discussed in section 6.5.

6.1 Being agentic in peer interactions in school but constrained in family

As mentioned in section 5.3 of Chapter 5, both of Hazel's parents migrated, leaving Hazel, her younger sister, and their paternal grandpa at home. As a junior middle school commuter, she is required to take part in after-school self-study program tailored specifically for LBC commuters, resulting in longer school hours compared to other non-LBC commuters. Despite this, Hazel actively engages in peer interactions at school.

Below are two new extracts from Hazel, labelled as HL 2 and HL3, which are employed in this section to compare her ability in peer interactions at school and within her family. By taking the two different social settings into consideration, the relational constraint imposed by Hazel's grandpa and its impact on her agency in peer relationships at home are identified.

Below is extract HL2. In this extract, Hazel described feeling agitated by a triadic friendship involving herself and two other girls from school. The other two girls appeared to be closer with each other than to Hazel. Sensing this unusual social climate (Pinchover and Attar-Schwartz, 2014), she shared her feelings and explained her decisions on how to handle the situation. Extract HL2 will be combined with the observations of Hazel's related posts on WeChat Moments to provide a comprehensive illustration of the findings. These posts on Hazel's WeChat Moments also serve as supporting evidence, illustrating how the other two girls influenced Hazel's relational agency and how she responded to their impact. Hazel started from expressing her willingness to opt out of the triadic friendship in extract HL2 below as she felt a bit isolated:

Hazel: Do you think that friendship among three people can last?

Me: It depends on the personal traits of the three individuals involved in the friendship circle, such as whether they respect each other.

Hazel: There is a friendship circle involving the three of us at school, but the other two girls often hang out together and rarely invite me to join them. I feel like they have many secrets that they have never shared with me.

Me: Well, you could consider having other friends instead of relying solely on the two of them. It seems that in this circle, they are closer to each other.

Hazel: So, do you think that I am too sensitive?

Me: Not at all. I can tell that you are very observant and considerate.

Hazel: In fact, I have poor social skills when it comes to managing relationships with peers in school.

Me: How come? What makes you feel that way?

Hazel: Sometimes, I am very straightforward with them. I think I may have hurt them somehow. I would rather stay at home than go to school.

Me: I think you were just being genuine in your peer relationships. Plus, you have reflected on your actions, which is a good sign. So, you are just doing fine.

Hazel: However, when they speak very straightforwardly to me, I ask them to stop. Does this mean I am holding a double standard in how I handle peer relationships?

Me: But you could also ask yourself: Do you want to be the complete opposite, like flattering others by saying things you do not genuinely mean? Or would you prefer to just “go with the flow” and try to fit into a circle where you do not truly feel you belong?

Hazel: No.

Me: Then I guess, they might not be ready or willing to hear the truth coming from you.

Hazel: Yes, maybe.

Me: If you feel that you might have hurt their feelings, you could consider apologising.

Otherwise, staying open-minded could help you build new friendships at school.

(instant messages, June 2023)

In extract HL2, both shifting perspectives and differentiating peer groups are evident, showcasing Hazel's relational agency in navigating peer interactions. Hazel has reflected on her straightforwardness and that of others together, demonstrating her ability to take others' perspectives into consideration when interacting with peers at school. Meanwhile, her shift in perspective enables her to take further actions to try to repair and develop a positive triadic friendship. The other actions taken are evident in her posts on WeChat Moments, which will be soon illustrated in this section. In fact, it is through this shift in perspectives that she came to understand why the other two girls distanced themselves from her. It is perhaps due to what she described as 'having poor social skills' (in extract HL2 above) and being too straightforward that she perceived their alienation. Hazel's awareness of feeling alienated led her to distinguish herself from the other two girls through varied social behaviours. Whether it involved hidden secrets or unspoken judgements made by the other two girls that Hazel was never privy to, Hazel exhibited a strong awareness of the differences between herself and the other two members of the so-called triadic friendship. Hence, she demonstrates agency in differentiating herself from the other two girls. It is also evident that she felt unwelcome in the triadic friendship. Her ability to identify possible reasons through a shift in perspectives shaped and influenced her actions in differentiating peer groups.

Furthermore, I suggested specific criteria for Hazel to make decisions when she was differentiating herself from the other two girls, such as being genuine versus being flattering. She identified more with being genuine, which can also be regarded as an example of her relational agency. This aligns with the notion of criteria acquisition, creation, and application as a form of LBC's agency, as addressed in section 5.3 of Chapter 5. Similar to Sophia, Hayden and Pangolin, who demonstrated the ability to acquire, create, and apply criteria, Hazel also showed ability in differentiating peer groups using some suggested criteria. This ability may further guide her actions and decision-making in peer relationships.

As explained in section 4.6.2 of Chapter 4, WeChat Moments enables users to share text or pictures with captions exclusively with their friends. In Hazel's case, she added both the other two girls from the triadic friendship on WeChat and enabled them to view her posts on WeChat Moments. Hazel utilised such function on WeChat for the other two girls to explore her posts silently and softly, without any direct confrontations. Hazel also demonstrated her agency in dealing with the triadic friendship by doing so. I argue that the functionality design of digital applications like WeChat helps Chinese children avoid social embarrassment in their daily real-life interactions. When considering their daily living conditions, Chinese children are often taught to demonstrate their strengths when competing with their peers in the exam-oriented education and prepare for the future competitive job market (Zhao, 2016). This contrasts with stepping back and offering apologies, which are often perceived as signs of weakness and shame in contemporary Chinese social norms (Ho et al., 2004). Therefore, apologising requires courage, a sentiment that equally applies to Chinese LBC when navigating their peer relationships.

In addition, I resonated with Abebe's (2009) argument on navigating ethics in research involving children in the Global South, particularly the emphasis on providing children with immediate help when needed. This reflects the reciprocity between researchers and participants, which is considered as an ethical practice within the Majority World context (Abebe, 2009). In my research, suggesting Hazel to apologise if needed was a deliberate consideration of ethical practice, particularly in the context of research involving Chinese LBC, who are often perceived in prior LBC studies (as addressed in section 2.2.2 of Chapter 2) as vulnerable with limited access to resources. My intention was not to influence Hazel's peer interactions but to offer her support when parents were away, demonstrating reciprocity between Hazel and me, as she participated in my research without receiving any compensation. She also regarded me as someone with whom she could share her honest feelings and seek help when facing social difficulties in the absence of her parents.

After Hazel texted me the above (as illustrated in extract HL2), she had several relevant posts on her WeChat Moments. One was about her public apology saying if she had hurt anyone's feelings when just being honest, then she would like to apologise. It is evident in Hazel's posts that she had the courage to do

public apology, demonstrating her agency in trying to fix a broken triadic friendship. This might seem like I intervened in their triadic friendship, which could be perceived as unethical, but I was merely offering what I considered ethical assistance within the specific context I had explained, from a researcher's perspective. I did not actually participate in or influence the subsequent development of their friendship.

Another post reflected her concession regarding her feelings within the triadic friendship, indicating her decision to opt out if she continued to feel isolated. Her relational agency lies not only in her public apology posted on WeChat Moments, but also in her intention to withdraw from the triadic friendship she felt she did not belong. The above two posts were seamlessly blended into many of Hazel's other posts, which showcased her frequent outings with another girl in a consistent child-child dyadic relationship. The other girl's nickname appeared consistently throughout these posts. It was found that nicknaming close friends is an act of intimacy among Chinese LBC (Xiao, 2015b). Hazel also embraced this peer social norm as part of her relational agency in peers to strengthen friendship she cultivated elsewhere. It was confirmed that the other girl was not part of the triadic friend circle.

I argue that Hazel subtly demonstrated her relational agency by presenting alternative friend choices to the two girls involved in the triadic friendship, indicating that she was also liked and befriended by others unknown to the two girls given that Hazel never asked me how to deal with the dyadic friendship. This demonstrated that Hazel was seldom puzzled by the dyadic friendship. It was also evident that Hazel was more competent to deal with dyadic peer relationship with the girl she nicknamed, compared to the frustrations she experienced in the triadic one. Hence, I also argue that when the third person is present, the third person might hinder Hazel's relational agency in peer relationships. In fact, this is evident in extract HL3 below, which illustrates how she managed another triadic relationship involving herself, her grandpa, and her younger sister.

In addition, Hazel not only relied on WeChat Moments to maintain friendships and demonstrate her agency with different peer groups but also embedded her agency in self-reflecting on her straightforwardness within the triadic friendship. Drawing on extract HL2, she attributed the instability of the triadic friendship to

both herself and the other two peers. Thus, her relational agency also lies in in her efforts to address and solve the challenges she faced in her peer relationships. Simultaneously, she remained ambivalent about who ultimately contributed to the weakened rapport within the triadic friendship. Also, in the practices of her relational agency, she valued how she was treated and how she used to treat others. Her awareness of decent treatments for friends later inspired her to initiate posts on WeChat Moments.

Both extract HL1 employed in Chapter 5 and extract HL2 addressed above have mostly shown Hazel's multi-dimensional relational agency in peer interactions at school. However, extract HL3 below regarding Hazel's peer interaction experience at home reveals Hazel's frustration in taking initiative when dealing with peer relationship at home, in exercising her full agency and making her own decisions due to her grandpa's constraint. Grandpa's strong sense of traditional birth order and Confucian social norms in family life (Freedman, 1970; Hsu and Freedman, 1973; Hsu, 1985; Tenenbaum et al., 2020) hindered Hazel's presentation and exercise of agency in peer interactions at home and encouraged the manipulation of Hazel's younger sister. Thus, relational constraints that Hazel experienced are considered as an imposition made by both Hazel's grandpa and her younger sister in extract HL3 below:

Hazel: Can I ask you a question?

Me: Of course.

Hazel: Why is that every time that my sister does something wrong, I am always the one who must accept the punishment from our grandpa?

Me: Could you tell me more about what happened?

Hazel: Tonight, my sister broke my grandpa's cup, she told my grandpa that I did it. It was not the first time that she made me her scapegoat, only because I am older than her. She also broke some bowls in the kitchen and framed me for that. Every time when grandpa asks who the troublemaker is, she always points at me.

Me: Did you explain?

Hazel: I did, every single time. But it does not seem to make any difference.

Me: How old is your sister, may I ask?

Hazel: She is four years old.

Me: I completely understand how you feel because, when I was a kid, I often got blamed by the elders in my family for similar situations, even when I had not done anything wrong.

Hazel: I suppose seniors just want to ensure we do not make mistakes during this stage of our lives as kids, so they tend to exaggerate things to prevent us from developing bad habits. Since I am the oldest, so I must take my responsibilities and set a good example for my younger sister.

Me: Exactly. But sometimes, they do not use the most appropriate way to educate us. It is not our fault at all. Also, adults are experiencing being someone's parents or grandparents for the first time.

Hazel: Yes. Maybe I still cannot understand my grandpa's ways of showing his love and care to us.

Me: If you think you were not wrong, you should trust yourself. Sometimes, I feel like the seniors at home should take time to reflect on themselves. You are still a child, and it is not

really your responsibility to understand them or think from a senior's perspective. You deserve a happy childhood, not one weighed down by such challenges.

Hazel: Thank you. However, I still feel that, as a child in my family, the seniors might think I have limited life experience and know nothing.

Me: But as younger ones in a family, I think they understand things. They observe and comprehend everything, just like your younger sister.

Hazel: Yes.

Me: I am not suggesting that you go against what your grandpa has told you to do. Instead, avoiding miscommunication when negotiating with him can help prevent potential interpersonal conflicts or arguments within the family.

Hazel: Sure. Thank you for telling me this.

(instant messages, June 2023)

She initiated this conversation with me, which could be regarded as her agency of expressing herself, defending herself and seeking validation from the outside, even it is not regarded as her relational agency in peer interactions. In the triadic kinship involving her younger sister and her grandpa, Hazel's relational agency in peers within her family is limited to her self-explanations to her grandpa, particularly when she perceives her younger sister as the usual troublemaker. Unlike her younger sister, she did not utilise their positional advantage as the older child in the family to alter the situation, even though older siblings in Chinese families are often perceived as having more authority and power, similar to that of adults or other seniors, over their younger counterparts. As addressed in extract HN1 in Chapter 5, Hayden's older sister used her authoritative position to demand Hayden to bring her hot water for washing her feet. In contrast, Hazel posted her concerns about her younger sister on WeChat Moments, just like Sophia did to her younger sister when mimicking their parents to persuade her younger sister as shown in extract SH1 in section 5.2, Chapter 5.

Compared with her multi-dimensional agency identified above in this chapter in dealing with the triadic friendship, and her agentic decisions made when interacting with her old friend in school in section 5.3 of Chapter 5, her agency in managing the relationship with her younger sister seemed to be weaker as she only did self-explanations to their grandpa when encountering unfair treatment at home by both her younger sister and their grandpa. Due to their grandpa's authoritarian constraint on her and her interactions with her younger sister, Hazel has limited space to express herself or take action in family peer interactions. Instead of taking actions to break the imposed constraint, Hazel tried to shift perspectives to understand her grandpa when pondering over the reasons of grandpa's unfounded accusations against her. When trying to

navigate the possible reasons behind through our text messages (in extract HL3), she can also relate my experience to hers and think from an adult's perspective to try to figure out why her grandpa did not listen to her.

As an outsider, I tried to tell Hazel that adults make mistakes. I do not want to make Hazel feel like adults have the superior authority over everything that relates to a child. In this way, I was trying to use the meaning of children's agency in plain words during the interview. Later, she also mentioned that her grandpa is literate and has relatively high achievement in education, compared to other people's grandparents. So, she expected that her grandpa must have certain educational experience that is considered as the family heritage that she should be proud of. This is a very common phenomenon in Chinese society where one's educational achievement is valued and aligned with one's parenting styles (Sing, 1996). Nonetheless, she noticed that her grandpa misconstrued her interaction with her younger sister which is apparently not acceptable. At the same time, she did not want to subvert adults and adults' authority in her family, even though a grievance was growing on her. Hence, I argue that the grandpa's educational achievement formulates another type of constraint on Hazel's agency peer interactions within her family, as his educational achievement also represented his authority in parenting (Hsu, 2017) in the left-behind family. When younger ones in kinship-based societies argue with elder ones, they are regarded as questioning older ones' authority and their prior achievement which is also publicly acknowledged (Huang and Gove, 2015). So, Hazel's grandpa \ felt being questioned and offended by Hazel. Instead of addressing the issue at hand, he elevated it to morally bind Hazel within the scope of kinship ties in the family and overlooked the justice in the interactions between Hazel and her younger sister.

However, compared with Hazel's thoughtful and considerate inward attribution as an older child, her younger sister was more of manipulator and a beneficiary of her vulnerable social position in the family. In fact, by making use of her vulnerabilities as a younger one who is naturally considered as being innocent and ignorant (Freedman, 1970; Hsu, 1985; Tenenbaum et al., 2020), Hazel's younger sister also imposed relational constraint on Hazel's when utilising adult's authority. It is precisely because that Hazel's younger sister knew their grandpa's reactions toward troublemakers in the family, and birth order related

responsibilities and vulnerabilities, she manipulated Hazel and escaped punishment for herself. Although it is her imposition on Hazel when arguing from Hazel's perspective, it is still Hazel's younger sister's agency in managing sistership within the family. Hence, I argue that agency does not always represent positivity and positive energy; rather, it is better understood as an individual's motivation or purpose in a neutral sense. Also, it is evident that Hazel's younger sister was observant at such a young age regarding the above identified norms of Chinese kinship, which further demonstrates that younger LBC are not always innocent as perceived. However, due to adults' unconsciousness of that and traditional social norms in Chinese society which causes the allocation of more responsibilities for older children in a family, similar situations also emerged in other extracts (such as extracts WA1 and AM in this chapter) from other participants.

In all, from extract HL2 and HL3, it is evident that children's relational agency is multi-dimensional but also constrained by adults and peers when the specific social setting and power dynamics changed. The essence of the relational constraints imposed by Hazel's grandpa and her younger sister at home is the norms of overloading older children with family responsibilities, and respecting the literate who are also the elderly in kinship-based society like Chinese society (Cheng and Chan, 2006). The constraints are intuitively relational, yet also cultural and traditional. Also, the interpretation of the essence of the constraints can be applied to understand other similar situations.

Extract WA1 below is about Weiai's awareness of constraints imposed by her grandma in her family when socialising with his younger male cousin. Weiai shares the care provided by her paternal grandma as their mutual surrogate parent with her younger male cousin. Most of the time, her relationship with her cousin is under her grandma's supervision. Just like Hazel's living condition that described above, Weiai also expressed the surrogate parent's ignorance regarding her own innocence and her relevant justification. However, different from Hazel, the constraint imposed by Weiai's grandma contained her gender bias against Weiai. Thus, gender might make a difference in understanding relational constraints imposed by adults on LBC's relational agency with peers within their families and the essences embedded, just like what extract WA1 demonstrates:

Weiai: Do you think that I am selfish?

Me: No. Could you tell me more about what happened?

Weiai: Why my grandma always perceives that I am selfish? I helped strangers on the street and supported my peers in school, so I think that I am not selfish at all.

Me: Of course you are not. I think you are very warm-hearted, and you are always ready to offer helps to others!

Weiai: But today I forgot to bring chopsticks³⁸ for everyone (her grandma and her younger cousin) to use at home before dinner, and my grandma described me as a selfish person. I felt aggrieved because I explained that I just forgot to do so, and it was only for this time. But she thought that I was quibbling over my mistake.

Me: Ah, I think your grandma judged the situation too quickly. She also does not know you well enough yet. Any similar things happened before if you do not mind me asking?

Weiai: Last time, my classmate brought me some snacks to eat, and I did not know that my cousin (male; younger than her as mentioned) was coming to meet me³⁹. So, when he came, I was eating the snacks. When my grandma saw it, again she called me a selfish person because I did not share any of the snacks with my cousin. I explained again, but she never listened to me. Why my growing-up process is always inseparable from being described as a selfish person? I really hate adults doing that.

Me: Me too, I do not like it as well. I can totally relate to you. So, if the same thing happened among you and your peers in school, how would you handle it?

Weiai: If that happened, I would choose to explain. But we do not have much miscommunication like what happened at home. My grandma always asked me to do more for my cousin.

Me: That is absolutely not fair. So, miscommunication between you and your peers in school did happen before?

Weai: My best friend and I we used to misunderstand each other, but we got back together after we sorted everything out together.

Me: Incredible! Maybe explaining yourself to your grandma just does not work.

(instant messages, April 2022)

Weiai's self-doubt arose from grandma's parenting styles which shaped the child-adult power imbalance between herself and her grandma, as her self-clarification of being selfless to people was not accepted by her grandma.

Otherwise, her grandma would not constantly describe her as a selfish person to her cousin. However, from the end of extract WA1, it was evident that her self-clarification worked when solving misunderstanding between herself and her best friend in school. When dealing with miscommunications emerged from peer relationship in school, Weiai was very agentic. Her agency in peer relationships in school lies in her explanations and actions taken to address misunderstanding in peer relationships. However, compared to Weiai's peer interactions experienced at home, the child-adult power imbalance in her family constrained Weiai and influenced the peer interactions between Weiai and her male cousin. When referring to how she dealt with her relationship with her younger male cousin, the imposition from her grandma who always viewed Weiai as a selfish person was very evident. She also felt frustrated when trying to convince her grandma by conducting self-clarification and explanations

³⁸ Bringing chopsticks for family members who dine together is assumed as a polite and considerate behaviour in Chinese familial culture (Li, 2019).

³⁹ In the Chinese context, usually, the older children in the family have the responsibility to help parents and other seniors to look after the younger ones as this is a way to prove that an older child is sensible and obedient to adults in the family (Liu, 2014).

related to the different situations addressed in extract WA1. Meanwhile, she started with a disclosure of self-doubt in extract WA1 above. She demonstrated agency in addressing problems together with her best friend at school but felt constrained at home. The inconsistency in her awareness of what she found effective and ineffective in communications between school and family settings resulted in such self-doubt.

Differentiated treatments made by her grandma as a surrogate parent were sensed by Weiai. Other than extract WA1 above, it is also confirmed from other of her text messages that she could do nothing to change the order of birth, or the gendered bias made by her grandma. Thus, her sense of inequality arose, rooted in her grandma's preference of her younger male cousin in a family over her. Her awareness of gender difference and birth order between herself and her cousin even led an active social agent like Weiai to seek self-validation from me as a researcher and a mere stranger to her. Meanwhile, the differentiated treatments made by grandma stemmed from gender bias and birth order bias which dominate the family rituals preached by their grandma (Qin and Xia, 2015; Chu, 2018; Yang and Wang, 2023), including bringing chopsticks for and sharing snacks with her cousin. It is also evident that Weiai did not accept misunderstandings, biases or stereotypes embedded in the social rituals endorsed by her grandma, who is the only adult or currently the only authority in her left-behind family. In other words, her peer relationship with her cousin is also under the pressure and intervention of her grandma, which is also not equal and is unacceptable from Weiai's point of view. Furthermore, Weiai claimed that she was innocent when her grandma considered that she was guilty, which often happened when Weiai's cousin was present. These are all viewed as constraints that Weiai's grandma imposed on her when socialising with her cousin. These constraints further might determine Weiai's relational agency in handling her relationship with her cousin at the left-behind family.

When comparing Weiai's experience with Hazel's, Weiai's agency is evident in her awareness of being treated differently due to biases related to birth order and gender differences. In contrast, Hazel tended to justify the actions of adults in her family, demonstrating that her agency also encompassed an understanding and acceptance of adult authority on her when interacting with her younger sister.

In all, adults, and their power and authority can hinder children's presentation of relational agency with peers. Particularly within the family context, adults' favoritism toward younger children in a family might encourage younger ones to borrow adults' power to intimidate and constrain the older ones, just like what Hazel's younger sister did.

6.2 Children's silences: unveiling the relational constraints imposed by both peers and adults in family

As discussed in section 6.1 above, Hazel and Weiai demonstrated their agency in peer interactions in school, but both were constrained by adults when interacting with peers at home. Both constraints that imposed by peers and adults in family hindered the practices of their agency as they felt frustrated when conducting self-clarification or self-explanation. Similar to Hazel and Weiai, Amy is also the oldest child in her family. She is a nine-year-old commuter attending a primary school, who lives with her maternal grandparents and her younger brother related by blood. Both her mum and her stepfather migrated. She also meets her stepsister occasionally during holidays. From her teachers' perspective, she is a mature, well-behaved and considerate child who always achieves good grades at school and has strong communicative skills with people. However, what she told me was more about her heart-wrenching and emotional experience of being expected as a mature and considerate child in her family. I argue that such expectations from adults also formulate as relational constraints, even these are not unfounded accusation that Hazel and Weiai both experienced. Extract AM below illustrates Amy's silences toward adults, and her active engagement in peer relationships within the family:

Me: Are you the only child in your family?

Amy: I have a younger brother. We live with our grandparents. My brother often beats me or kicks me without any reason. My mum treats us equally before her migration. But things changed after she migrated. I think our grandma spoils my brother a lot. Before he was born, our grandma loved me very much. After he was born, she has been partial to him. They (grandparents) think that I am the oldest, I should be forbearing. Even if the younger ones are wrong, they are forgiven simply because they are younger? I do not really agree with that.

Me: Me too. So, I guess that you have more than one sibling within your family?

Amy: Yes. I also have a stepsister from my mum's current husband. I call him uncle. He also thinks that I should be a role model for my stepsister in our stepfamily. I should not even feel aggrieved. That is so stressful. There is no conflict between my stepsister and I, but my uncle also asks me to bear with my younger brother when he hits me or kicks me.

Me: That is sad and indeed not fair. Have you ever tried to tell your mum about it?

Amy: I cannot talk to her about it. She is so far away from us. Even she often tells me that she loves me, and she wants to be a friend to me rather than a parent. She always encourages me to tell her everything about me. She thinks that we can be the closest

mother and daughter in the world. But once when I requested to see my dad, she refused it. They already got divorced. She also did not tell me why they got divorced. So, I do not think that I can share with her everything about me. You see what I mean? Also, she has got her own worries to deal with in her life. I should not say anything that troubles me to add to her own troubles. When my mum and my uncle have bitter arguments, I am always the one who takes my brother and stepsister away. My aunt also steps in to mediate. I think I did what all the seniors expected me to do as the oldest child in the family.

(in-person interview, September 2023)

Similar to Hazel and Weiai, Amy also demonstrated her ability in handling peer relationships at home. However, unlike Hazel and Weiai, Amy's relational agency in peer relationships lies in her ability to share childcare responsibilities with adults, even when she was also treated unequally by adults. By caring younger ones when parents were in bitter arguments, Amy's agency in peer relationships in family context was constrained by adults' expectations of her as the oldest and a female child in the family. Simultaneously, her grandparents and her stepfather constantly preached and encouraged her to tolerate her younger brother's behaviours, including randomly hitting and kicking her. This is not merely about how adult's expectations and imposition on the oldest child in a family; it also reflects the Chinese tradition of encouraging or promoting reconciliation in interpersonal conflicts (Sundararajan, 2020). Such tradition is also a dominant social norm in contemporary China (Wang and Juslin, 2009; Li and Cui, 2022). Tolerating others is often seen as a way to maintain holistic harmony, which is prioritised over personal grievances or emotional conflicts (Li, 2013). Amy's aunt also helped mediate the quarrels between Amy's mum and stepfather (in extract AM above), further reflecting adults' preoccupation with maintaining family harmony. Thus, adults' constraints are rooted not only in their expectations of the oldest child but also in their fixation on and efforts to facilitate interpersonal harmony among children.

It is evident that the younger brother was spoiled so that he treated Amy very casually and carelessly. At the same time, Amy felt unfair as she was also expected to tolerate him. I argue that Amy demonstrates sufficient agency to recognise and articulate the differentiated treatments that adults in the family impose on children based on gender and age. However, it is exactly because that she is a considerate child that she chose not to tell her mum about the unequal treatments and instead endured the grandparents, her stepfather and the younger brother. Thus, adults' intervention in peer interactions in family is evident in extract AM above. Adults' expectations on Amy are understood as a

type of relational constraint imposed by them on Amy's, shaping her relational agency when interacting with her younger brother at home.

Amy also demonstrated her silences when interacting with peers at home. As Amy's relational agency is constrained by her grandparents and stepfather, she can only turn to her mum for emotional support. However, Amy understands how hard her mother works and how difficult her life is. So, she refrains from seeking her mum's help, as doing so might add to her mother's burdens. Her reluctance to speak reflects the reason behind her silence, demonstrating her sense of agency in understanding relationships before seeking help to address the inequality experienced in peer interactions within the family. At the same time, her mother turned down her request to meet her father, further exacerbating the situation by blocking another potential outlet for Amy's emotions. Thus, it is evident that adults' imposition also lies in their insistence on prioritising their own interpersonal stances in a failed marriage over addressing children's interpersonal and emotional needs. Endless silences led Amy to take part in my research, providing her with a place to express her feelings to a total stranger. Nonetheless, she demonstrated her agency by meeting adults' expectations of her as the eldest child, such as removing younger siblings during parental quarrels. However, Amy faced impositions and constraints from adults that were beyond what a nine-year-old could bear.

As addressed in extract HN1 in Chapter 5, Hayden's older sister asserted her authority over Hayden when Hayden refused her demand to bring hot water. Hayden also took a 'revenge' against her older sister for perceived unfair treatment. In contrast, Amy met adults' expectations, instead of asserting authority over younger siblings as an older child. Meanwhile, the difference between Amy and Hayden extends beyond their distinct family roles—Amy as the eldest child and Hayden as a younger sibling. It also lies in how they exercise their agency in peer relationships at home, shaped by their awareness of their respective family positions. Younger children in Chinese families are generally subject to fewer expectations from adults compared to their older siblings (Zhan, 2005). As a result, younger ones may engage in acts of retaliation without hesitation, as what Hayden did, since they are less likely to consider adults' reactions and expectations in the way older children might. This is not a criticism of younger children for being seemingly inconsiderate. It is

merely a comparison of the different constraints experienced by children in different family positions determined by their birth order.

It is also evident that Amy is agentic in differentiating peers by their social behaviours. She felt that she got along better with her stepsister than with her younger brother, which is rare in remarried families within a kinship-based society (Hsu, 1948). At the same time, it means that Amy places greater importance on whether the adults treat all the children equally, which also shapes her relational agency with peers in the family.

Hazel, Weiai and Amy are the oldest female children in their left-behind families. Compared with the pessimistic constraints imposed by Hazel's grandpa and Weiai's grandma, Amy's grandparents and stepfather imposed optimistic expectations on her. Hazel and Weiai tended to seek self-validation and conduct self-explanation, while Amy tended to be more silent in front of adults as the constraint imposers. It appears that Amy did not have the desire to remove the constraints made by adults in the family, which sets her apart from Hazel and Weiai. Amy's reluctance to speak about her younger brother's behaviours helped her avoid potential misunderstanding from adults regarding how she treats the younger children in the family. Thus, it is evident that she successfully navigated her position and related responsibilities when handling peer relationships and managing interpersonal conflicts at home effectively, gaining recognition from the adults at home. As a result, they did not impose constraints on her through criticism. Instead, adults' recognitions and expectations increased her pressure as the eldest child. Thus, adults' constraints do not always appear in the form of accusations or criticism.

In all, beyond the unfounded accusations by adults in families that addressed in section 6.1, constraints that imposed by adults on LBC's relational agency in managing peer relationships in their families also stem from adults' expectations of the older or oldest LBC. Also, as addressed both in section 6.1 and 6.2 above, younger children in LBC's families were also aware of older or oldest children's expected responsibilities imposed by adults, and the correspondent accountability mechanism at home. Thus, younger ones were found to agentic to impose constraints when utilising this mechanism by manipulating or casually and carelessly treating the older ones. These are all the constraints that LBC received from both peers and adults when interacting with peers in family. Even

they were found to be agentic in dealing with peer relationships in school, they still faced constraints imposed by peers and adults in family, indicating that their agency is not always transferrable across different time and spaces. This raises the need to address the following sub-question when exploring the second research question about relational constraints: what are the constraints that limit LBC from fully practicing their agency with peers exclusively within the school environment? To address this sub-question, I will use section 6.3 and 6.4 below to demonstrate relational constraints that LBC received in school when interacting with peers.

6.3 Being agentic to deal with peers' constraints but constrained by adults in school

Different from section 6.1 and section 6.2, this section will emphasise how peers and adults impose constraints on LBC in school setting. These constraints also shape LBC's relational agency in navigating peer relationships in school. Extract ET below will be combined with 3 previous extracts from Chapter 5 to demonstrate the co-existence of agency and constraints. The identification of LBC's agency in peer interactions also facilitates the recognition of constraints present in school, particularly when teachers are viewed as the authoritarian party.

Chloe and Charlotte are two close friends in the same class. Chloe is also a nine-year-old day student attending the same primary school as Charlotte. Both of Chloe's parents migrated, leaving her to live at home with her non-Mandarin-speaking grandma. Chloe's family belongs the Yi ethnic group, one of the fifty-five officially recognised ethnic minorities in China (Ting and Sundararajan, 2018). In the school that Chloe attends, the Han ethnic group is the dominant majority. Normally, children like Chloe attend bilingual schools for ethnic minorities. However, this primary school is considered the best in the county where many ethnic minorities reside. Relevant preferential policies are designed to provide ethnic minorities with greater access to educational resources, additional points on university entrance exams, and enhanced opportunities for employment and improved living conditions in China (Sautman, 1998; Zang, 2016). Enrolling her in the best school for education appears to be a beneficial choice that could increase her future opportunities.

Chloe has lived up to the expectations placed on her by both the society and her family, as she is well-behaved and often achieves good grades in school. However, when faced with constraints imposed by peers in school, she seems to be out of her depth. Extract ET below is from a focus group interview conducted with both Chloe and Charlotte during a class break. Both Chloe and Charlotte are victims of bullying perpetrated by five boys in their class. Chloe seats right next to one of the five boys in the classroom. Extract ET below demonstrates Chloe's frustration as that she expresses her desire to change seatmate but felt helpless, stating that no one could truly assist her:

Me: Is there anything you find interesting or annoying when you socialise with your peers in school or family?

Chloe: My seatmate is very annoying. Our *banzhuren* asked us to sit together so that I can help him improve his studies⁴⁰. I am doing better than him academically.

Me: Would you mind telling me why you find him annoying?

Chloe: He has a very bad temper. He cannot control his temper sometimes. When he gets triggered, he will vent his anger on me.

Me: For example?

Chloe: He throws ink on me, so I could not wear anything in light colours when attending school.

Me: Have you ever tried to tell your *banzhuren* about it?

Chloe: So many times! But reporting him to the *banzhuren* did not work. I told the *banzhuren* that I need to change seats⁴¹, then our *banzhuren* removed both of us together to another group instead of assigning me a new seatmate.

Me: Have you told your parents about it?

Chloe: I told my mum, but she always says next time she will tell our *banzhuren*. She never did so. So far, I could only endure it. Maybe, she does not want to trouble the *banzhuren*⁴². I live with my grandma, and she does not speak Mandarin. She only speaks Yi dialect. All the teachers at school speak Mandarin, so they cannot communicate with each other. Even though I have my grandma's support, there are also language barriers in our communication.

Me: That is a bit tricky. How do you feel right now?

Chloe: I do not feel happy when I am in school. I have a big family and very good siblings. All of them are older than me. They often buy me things that I like, and I also buy them birthday gifts, even when I am running out of pocket money. Totally different experience. I wish that I could get rid of my seatmate, but no one can really help me. I do not like this arrangement of sitting right next to him.

Charlotte: Yes, I know her seatmate. He is one of the five annoying boys in our class.

(in-person interview, September 2023)

It is evident in extract ET that Chloe actively reported her seatmate to her *banzhuren*. However, this action led to an undesirable outcome as they were reassigned to a new group but continued sitting together. Her seatmate continued treating her badly, but at the same time, she was expected by her *banzhuren* to help him with his studies. Even Chloe was agentic to seek adults'

⁴⁰ It is a common pedagogical strategy called 'Peer Tutoring' that *banzhurens* or specialized course teachers in China would use to make the top students to help the underachievers in classes (Song et al., 2018).

⁴¹ Chinese pupils in a class often have their fixed seats allocated by teachers. They often have a seatmate to sit together (Song et al., 2018).

⁴² Sometimes, parents think that if the *banzhuren* gets troubled by them, the *banzhuren* could have some attitudes toward their children which will affect their learning in school and the *banzhuren*'s impression of them (Cheng, 2010).

help and try to remove the seatmate's constraints, she remained frustrated. Chloe was also agentic enough in identifying adults' capacity, willingness and effectiveness to help her with the issues related to the seatmate. She also put trust in different groups of adults: her mum, her grandma and her *banzhuren* in school. However, no one effectively addressed the issues caused by the seatmate. Her mum was not willing to bother the *banzhuren*. Her grandma was not able to communicate with the *banzhuren* in Mandarin. Also, her *banzhuren* insisted on having her as a peer tutor (as addressed in the footnote) to her seatmate, which was why the *banzhuren* relocated both of them to another group.

In addition, parents' reluctance to report such issue to the *banzhuren* also contains their concerns and worries regarding whether the *banzhuren* would hold grudges against their children or not (Ho and Ho, 2008). Adults' reluctance and inability to help her formed as constraints on her relational agency when dealing with her troublemaking seatmate. Generally, the presence of parents can put some pressure on teachers in school in contemporary China, thereby encouraging teachers to address issues related to their students (Cheng, 2010). However, the decision made by Chloe's mum also discouraged Chloe from seeking help from the *banzhuren*. Chloe's description of her feelings about her school life is evidently unpleasant, compared to her illustration of happy family life with her older siblings. Even she was able to tell the differences of peer treatments experienced respectively in school and family, her agency to manage unpleasant peer interactions in school is constrained by the *banzhuren*'s authority and her mum's reluctance to intervene.

In fact, reporting annoying boys or the troublemakers in school to teachers is a very common phenomenon from data gathered from some of my participants. In extract AT1 from section 5.1 of Chapter 5, Anticipation showed her active participation in reporting the annoying boy in her class along with other girls who also had similar experience to their *banzhuren*. However, just like what Chloe experienced, Anticipation and the other girls in her class, they all were not successful in addressing the issues related to those annoying peers in school when utilising adults' power. Even, they all were aware of what adults' power and authority can do when they intervene their peer interactions with those troublemakers. In the beginning, Anticipation also trusted that adults could

help her to solve the problem caused by the annoying boy. But she gradually realised that her reporting was constrained within the *banzhuren*'s supervision, and the hidden conversations that she never knew between the *banzhuren* and the annoying boy. She also addressed that it was useless to report him for so many times. Even though those adults were aware of the urgent need to address the issues caused by the troublemakers, they chose to maintain their stances of not intervening in these problems. As the highest authority in the class, the *banzhuren*'s failure to address their students' issues effectively imposes an invisible constraint on their students' agency in dealing with their peer-related challenges in school. Also, it is precisely because the two girls' *banzhuren* failed to exert a deterrent effect on the troublemakers (the annoying boys) that the boys were able to repeatedly impose constraints on the two girls.

When the authority and power of adults are not utilised by children to address interpersonal conflicts with their peers or to remove constraints imposed by their peers, some children resort to self-help by initiating acts of revenge or adopting a tough demeanor. In fact, from extract CE and HN1 illustrated in Chapter 5, Charlotte and Hayden demonstrated their capacity to initiate revenges and help themselves out. Additionally, when encountering annoying boys, Charlotte relied on her own strengths, rather than borrowing anyone's strength or power.

Charlotte was also very proud of herself for being tough, which deterred those annoying boys from frequently targeting her. Similar to Charlotte's self-efficacy in addressing similar issues occurred in peer interactions, Hayden also took pride when being tough in handling the hierarchical relationship between herself and her older sister in family. When facing these constraints imposed by peers, both Anticipation and Chloe's agency appear to be limited within the boundaries set by adults' constraints. However, Charlotte and Hayden's reactions to peers' constraints seems to be autonomous and self-driven, aligning with the conceptualisation of agency, constraints, and social movement theory previously addressed in section 3.2.3 of Chapter 3. In addition, their autonomous actions in taking actions to address their own peer-related issues and to remove constraints imposed by peers are still within adults' power structure or constraints. But they still have successful experience to share and impress their peers who had similar encounters. Nevertheless, it might not be encouraged by some teachers or parents to do so in real world practices, the

constraints imposed by both children's peers and adults should be identified and be addressed properly.

Overall, when confronted with constraints imposed by peers and teachers in school, some LBC demonstrate limited agency in handling unpleasant peer encounters. However, within the framework of adults' power and constraints, certain LBC manage to rely on their own strengths and take initiative to resolve issues independently. They often take pride in their ability to help themselves, rather than relying solely on the power and authority of adults, when it is perceived ineffective.

6.4 Navigating adults' non-verbal constraints in school through the class committee (*banweihui*) and its impact on children's peer relationships

Compared with those above-mentioned participants in this chapter, another participant Aubrey seems to have more power among their peers in school, as she has student leader roles in school (Zhu, 2021a) who are members of the class committee. It is a student leadership system guided by teachers, usually *banzhuren*, to facilitate children's participation in adults' decision-making in Chinese schools (Shambaugh, 2008; Chin, 2011; Gu et al., 2017b). Additionally, the constraints imposed by adults in school on children who are members of the committee are considered different from those experienced by non-committee members. Those regarded as possessing adult-endorsed leadership abilities, tasked with assisting the *banzhuren* in managing the class, might exhibit different types of agency in peer interactions due to their roles within the class committee. Thus, by introducing the class committee system, I will identify constraints imposed by adults from Aubrey's perspective, and her agency that is related with her student leader role. Class committee relevant values and children's presentations of agency will also be further discussed in Chapter 7, addressing their ability to negotiate some social norms and justify themselves in peer interactions in school.

Aubrey is a twelve-year-old primary schooler who also boards in school. Her mum passed away and her dad is the only parent who also migrated. She lives with paternal grandparents and is very close with her older brother related by blood. I was double checked by both her dad and brother before approaching her and sending any message on WeChat to her. The men in the family take

great care of her, when living apart from her. She enjoys a relatively harmonious family life with close relationships among family members. From the text messages between us, she revealed more about her living experience in school. The most that she shared with me were about her insights and perceptions about adult authority and power in school. Below are two extracts respectively labeled as AU1 and AU2 from Aubrey. The extract below (AU1) illustrates how Aubrey perceived responsibilities and roles in student leadership, extending beyond her own:

Me: I heard that in your school, teachers organised a field trip for all of you. Anything you would like to share with me? It must be nice to spend some time out of school with your classmates on a one-day trip.

Aubrey: Yes. It was nice. We were on our phones on the way to the cave where we did our field trip. Then, our phones were dead on our way back to school. So, we just sang lots of songs along the way back.

Me: Who proposed to sing on the bus? It reminds me of my field trip when I was a child. It must be wonderful memories for you as well.

Aubrey: Me. We sang songs of Jay Chou⁴³, and JJ Lin⁴⁴.

Me: Are you from the class committee? It sounds like the kind of things typically associated with members of the class committee.

Aubrey: I am.

Me: Oh, lovely, which role?

Aubrey: I am the commissary in sports.

Me: I see. I thought you are the commissary in recreation. By the way, the songs you suggested are exactly my type.

Aubrey: I am glad you like them. I can sing some other songs, but my classmates cannot. So, I proposed something we all can sing together.

Me: I can see that you have a talent for initiating things when taking the lead. You did a great job. So, tell me more about your work as the commissary in sports?

Aubrey: Actually, I was the commissary in studies. But I did not feel fully engaged in the relevant activities in our class. The class monitor, or the deputy class monitor always led the morning "reading aloud" activity. And, for each subject or course that we learn, there was a course representative⁴⁵. So, I did not know what else I could do as a commissary in studies of our class.

(instant messages, April 2023)

The extract below (AU2) demonstrates how Aubrey shifted her student leader roles when the timing was opportune:

Me: Then, I wondered how you became the commissary in sports? Who suggested that you take this role?

Aubrey: When we used to go for running during the class break⁴⁶, the previous commissary in sports always had class extensions. So, our *banzhuren* also asked me whether I would like to lead the running activity, as she noticed that the previous commissary in sports often skipped it. I said yes. Later, I was nominated by our *banzhuren* to replace him as the new commissary in sports.

Me: Who is the commissary in studies now?

Aubrey: Someone else.

Me: So, your *banzhuren* asked you to take over the role, and you were happy about it?

⁴³ A very popular Chinese-speaking singer in pop music from Taiwan (Fung, 2008).

⁴⁴ Another popular Chinese-speaking singer in pop music based from Singapore (Lau, 2021).

⁴⁵ The course representative of Chinese can also lead the 'reading aloud' activity in the morning and collect homework on behalf of the Chinese teachers, which might affect Aubrey's performance of her duties as commissary in studies due to the overlap of responsibilities for these different student leader roles.

⁴⁶ Activities that they are required to do during a long break.

Aubrey: Yes.

Me: Could you tell me about the differences between two roles from your experiences?

Aubrey: Honestly, I did not think I could do much when I was the commissary in studies. But being a commissary in sports is different. When I lead the running activity, I must form up the team.

Me: So, being a commissary in sports provides you with more opportunities to finally do something for the whole class.

Aubrey: Yes. Definitely.

Me: All the student roles of the class committee were nominated by the *banzhuren*, so basically you just accepted the related arrangements?

Aubrey: Yes. It was unnecessary to say how I felt⁴⁷, but now I am happy to lead the running activity. Now I have been given this opportunity to show that I can initiate activities that benefit others. I also feel a greater sense of responsibilities.

(instant messages, April 2023)

As mentioned, class committee is a characteristic system in Chinese schools which facilitates students' leadership skills supported by the *banzhuren* of each class (Li and Chen, 2013). The diagram below (Diagram 6.3) illustrates the positions of both students and teachers on the class committee in Chinese schools, providing context-relevant information for understanding Aubrey's extracts illustrated above.

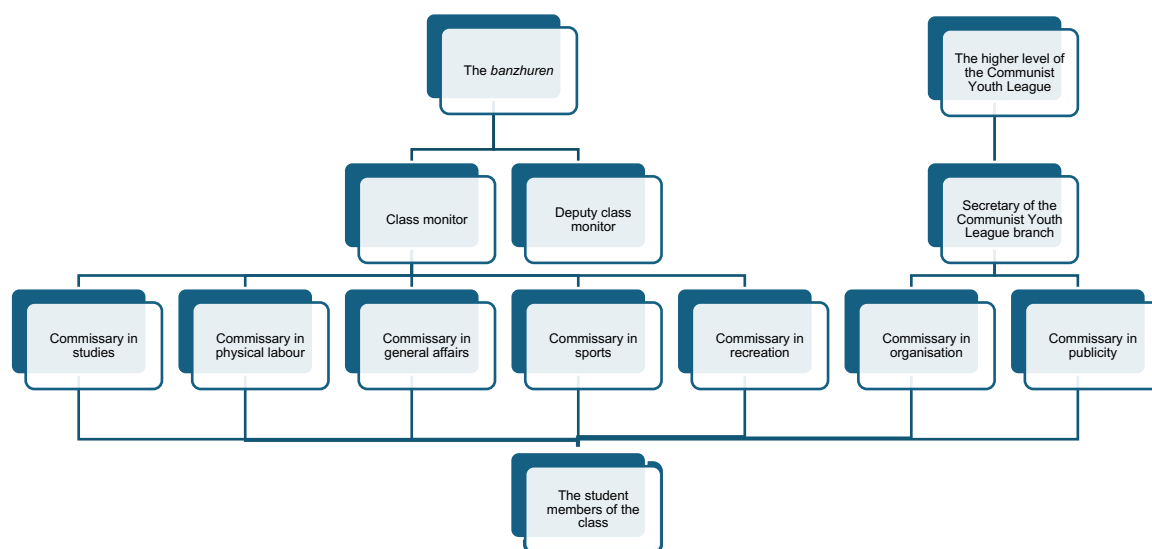


Diagram 6.3 Student's roles on the class committee and the *banzhuren*'s position

Resources: adapted and created by the researcher herself based on relevant working paper from Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (Jiaoyubu bangongting 教育部办公厅, 2020), online materials from Sina (Global Times. 环球时报, 2010), 360.com (Nicheng3379806 昵称 3379806, 2010), Baidu (Anon, n.d.), Wikipedia (Anon, n.d.), and the book *Portraits of Chinese Schools* by Gu, Ma and Teng (2017).

The function of a class committee is to support the *banzhuren*'s management of the whole class (Liu et al., 2018; Deng et al., 2020). In Diagram 6.3, it

⁴⁷ To report the repetition of responsibilities of student leaders in the class committee to the *banzhuren*.

demonstrates the positions of Aubrey, other student leaders, and their *banzhuren*. It also reveals the hierarchical class management system involving both teachers and students (Gu et al., 2017b). The key roles shown on Diagram 6.3 are fundamental. Other than student roles on the class committee that Aubrey mentioned in extracts AU1 and AU2, there are course representatives⁴⁸ (Snow et al., 2017) who might have overlap responsibilities with the commissary in studies, or class monitor, or deputy class monitor. Overall, the class committee system (shown in Diagram 6.3 above), the course representative system (shown in Diagram 6.4 below), and the Youth League branch in each class (shown in Diagram 6.3 above) formulate a triple-track teacher-centred class management mechanism involving both students and teachers (Li and Chen, 2013; Gu et al., 2017b).

From extract AU1, Aubrey's experience on the field trip demonstrated her ability to initiate social activities with her classmates. Noticing that their phones were dead and they were likely bored with nothing to do, she took the initiative to engage them. From extract AU2, it is evident that her relational agency as a former commissary in studies was constrained by the *banzhuren* who leads the class committee. However, she demonstrated agency by comparing her responsibilities with those of her peer colleagues before and after being appointed as the new commissary in sports. She also found the overlapped responsibilities in different class management systems. Additionally, she was aware that the appointment of these roles in her class was typically made by the *banzhuren*. Hence, all of her viewpoints and reactions regarding student leadership were shaped and constrained by the adults who oversaw the class committee and the course representative system.

Aubrey also mentioned the class monitor, the deputy class monitor, and how their practices as student leaders on the class committee impacted her practices as the former commissary in studies. They led learning activities, such as the 'reading aloud', which she considered as within her responsibilities as a commissary in studies. So, she did not have a sense of achievement when sitting on the class committee as she did not have the opportunity to fully practice her agency in her role as a student leader. Not to mention that the course representatives also took part of her duties. Her relational agency in

⁴⁸ In Mandarin pinyin: *kedaibiao*. In Chinese characters: 课代表.

navigating the overlapping responsibilities lies in her awareness of the circumstances involving herself and her peer colleagues.

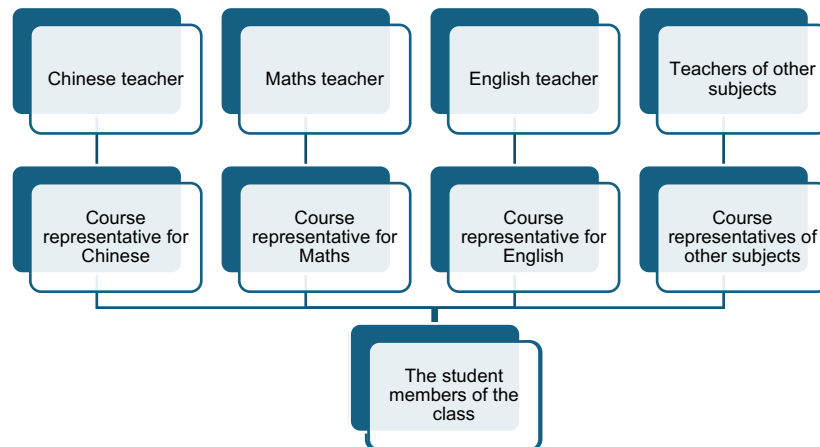


Diagram 6.4 Course representatives, other course teachers and the whole class

Resources: adapted and created by the researcher herself based on the relevant literature on *kedaibiao* in Chinese schools (Flores, 2013).

Even though it is not explicitly evident in Aubrey's extracts above, becoming a student leader and performing duties in Chinese public schools often indicates more opportunities facilitated by *banzhuren* (Ho and Ho, 2008). Hence, I argue that Aubrey and her peer colleagues might be compelled into such a competition to gain teachers' attention by demonstrating their leadership skills. However, Aubrey's agency appears to be cautious and reserved, as she did not request a change of roles but instead accepted the adults' arrangements, feeling it unnecessary to express her needs. Within the adult-led student management systems, she chose to take practical actions to demonstrate her agency in leading peer classmates. Her agency includes but perhaps is not limited to: 1) leading the singing activity on the fieldtrip; and 2) leading the running activity during class break.

I also argue that the reason behind her silence is the constraint that she recognised, stemming from her awareness of the power imbalance between herself and the *banzhuren*. This is regarded as her silent agency when negotiating student leader responsibilities with her peer colleagues, as the *banzhuren* has the authority to nominate student leaders. Meanwhile, her silent agency further shaped her routines of continuing to act as a commissary in studies until the timing for her to transition to a new leadership role was appropriate (when the *banzhuren* initiated the related conversation). It is also evident from her other text messages that the reason she accepted the

banzhuren's and other teachers' arrangements and waited for the right time to make a change was her intention to avoid potential interpersonal conflicts with her peer colleagues, as collectivism is strongly advocated within the dominant culture of Chinese classrooms (Francis et al., 2010). At the same time, I think that a harmonious family environment also led her to naturally avoid interpersonal conflicts at school.

In all, compared with Aubrey's presentation of agency in initiating activities as a member of class committee when socialising with classmates, Aubrey's agency in dealing with the work relationships with her peer colleagues seems to be constrained within the adult-led student management systems. Teachers, who are considered as the top layer of the student management systems, to some extent, hinder Aubrey's agency in interacting with her peer colleagues. Thus, her agency in peer interactions at school varies. The constraints were also invisibly imposed by teachers within the student management systems. Unlike the verbal impositions enforced by Hazel's grandpa and Weiai's grandma when younger children in their families were present, the constraints leading to Aubrey's silences were not explicitly verbal. I argue that these are systemic or structural constraints in the school environment that teachers and researchers might not be aware of. Thus, in addition to the verbal impositions previously addressed in section 6.1, nonverbal or structural constraints should also be considered as adult-imposed relational constraints. These imperceptibly shape children's agency in managing their peer relationships within the same structural setting where adults' power and authority dominate.

6.5 Discussion: the interconnections between relational agency, relational constraints, and children's silences; and the evidence of social norms

Starting with identifying LBC's relational agency in school and family settings, this chapter showed the striking contrast in how agency was presented in LBC's peer interactions across these two contexts. Following the contrast, the constraints imposed by both LBC's peers and adults in the two settings were also identified. Participants who demonstrated agency in one social setting appeared to be constrained by others when interacting with peers in another setting. This indicates the influence of both LBC's peers and adults in imposing relational constraints on LBC, which, in turn, shapes their relational agency.

Thus, LBC's agency is limited or constrained in the two settings, indicating the strong correlation between relational agency and relational constraint.

Similar to the multiple dimensions of LBC's relational agency with peers as previously identified in Chapter 5, different types of relational constraints were also recognised in sections above in this chapter. Whether in family or school, whether verbal or structural, related to unfounded accusations against children or certain expectations placed upon them, adults remain the dominant figures in imposing relational constraints. LBC's peers also have the ability or strength to impose relational constraints by making use of adult's authority and power. They can also impose constraints directly on LBC.

The reasons why LBC were considered as being silent toward adults in response to certain unpleasant or unexpected social encounters involving peers were addressed in section 6.2 and 6.4 above, along with identifying different types of relational constraints. These constraints were identified as contributing factors to children's silence. Simultaneously, as active social agents, LBC had an awareness of the constraints imposed by others and/or already took actions to try to break through the constraints on their own. Thus, there is also a strong connection between relational constraint and children's silent agency. So, I argue that interpreting children's silent agency in navigating peer relationships sheds light on the multiple constraints imposed by others, including peers and adults. However, the evidence presented above highlights adults' constraints more prominently than those imposed by peers when silences contribute to shaping LBC's agency.

In fact, constraints such as age-related responsibilities and expectations, and gender bias imposed by adults on children, as addressed in section 6.1 and 6.2 above, are also understood as social norms in family life in this research. Adults' power and authority in schools also shape children's responses, and even the norms of remaining silent toward them, whether or not this influence falls within the scope of the student management systems involving children. However, even though the norms identified above constrained and hindered LBCs' agency in peer interactions within both family and school settings, some LBC also demonstrated their own strengths and strategies to mitigate these impacts. This prompted me to further question and explore LBC's responses to these

relational constraints in their peer relationships, which could also be understood as another type of relational agency that addresses these relational constraints.

In the next chapter (Chapter 7), I will identify various types of children's negotiation of normativity and self-justification within their agency practices in peer interactions. Chapter 7 will also address the third research question, focusing on how LBC respond to imposed relational constraints that are perceived as social normativity.

Chapter 7 LBC's strengths in negotiating social normativity and justifying their social behaviours among peers

Children's strengths to negotiate social normativity and/or justify their related social behaviours (or self-justification) were conceptualised in section 3.3, Chapter 3. To reiterate briefly, children's negotiation and justification often enable them to express their viewpoints within power-laden social relationships. However, this does not always result in active participation in adult-led decision-making, or the subversion of power constraints imposed by others, including both peers and adults. Instead, these efforts tend to mitigate the binary opposition between norm-setters and those subjected to norms. Additionally, a sense of inequality and a rejection to universal truth may arise from this process, manifesting as another type of relational agency in response to imposed relational constraints.

Based on the relevant conceptualisations, I will identify multiple dimensions of LBC's strengths of normativity negotiation and self-justification in their peer relationships, addressing the third research question on how LBC respond to relational constraints imposed by others (including peers and adults who are involved in peer relationships). As discussed in section 6.5 of Chapter 6, social norms emerged from the identification of different relational constraints. In addition to the norms previously identified in Chapter 6 and those that emerged in Chapters 5, this chapter will also incorporate new norms advocated by both LBC's peers and the adults surrounding them. These norms include ground rules, such as prohibitions on snacks, early dating, and smart phones in school, and the expectations for children to always obey adults and their authority, reflecting broader societal norms in Chinese culture.

In total, this chapter draws on twenty-one extracts across the three empirical chapters (Chapters 5, 6, and 7). These appeared in Chapters 5 and 6 will be revisited below in this chapter. Revisiting these extracts highlights the strong connections among the three elements outlined in the conceptual framework in Chapter 3. All of these extracts will provide deeper insights into LBC's strengths in negotiating and justifying their actions with peers. Table 7.1 below illustrates the new extracts utilised in this chapter, along with their corresponding labels and locations. The extracts from Chapters 5 and 6 will be cross-referenced in the relevant discussions.

Table 7.1. New extracts involved in Chapter 7

No.	Pseudonym	Extract label	Location
1	Kevin	KV1	section 7.1
2	Kevin	KV2	
3	Grace	GA1	
4	Weiai	WA2	section 7.2
5	Weiai	WA3	
6	Pangolin	PG4	section 7.3
7	Pangolin	PG5	
8	Hazel	HL4	
9	Hazel	HL5	
10	Quincy	QU1	section 7.4
11	Quincy	QU2	

Source: data collected by the researcher herself

As the focus of the thesis is on LBC's relational agency in peer relationships, so their negotiation of social normativity and their related justification will be prioritised in this chapter. However, as discussed in Chapter 6, certain imposed constraints, which are regarded as social norms, also shape and influence LBCs' agency when interacting with peers. Additionally, as conceptualised in section 3.1 and 3.2 of Chapter 3, agency and constraints are two concepts that often paired together to discuss. So, the norms that hinder LBC's agency in peer relationships will also be unveiled to display a complete puzzle of the process of their normativity negotiations and/or justifications. Relevant discussions on social norms in the Chinese context will be interspersed throughout the analysis below, providing contextual explanations for this cross-cultural research.

Section 7.1 will demonstrate that LBC's normativity negotiation and justification with peers often align with adults' authority, reflecting their active participation in adult-led institutional settings. However, this does not result in their subversion of adult's authority. Section 7.2 will show how LBC actively engage in normativity negotiation and justification during peer interactions, which is subversive to the power constraints that imposed by both peers and the adults involved. Section 7.3 will show how LBC work around with certain ground rules, which are also seen as norms, set by teachers when interacting with peers. This demonstrates LBCs' and their collaborative efforts with their peers to mitigate

the power imbalance between norm-setters (often adults) and those subjected to the norms (LBCs and their peers). Section 7.4 will illustrate how LBC collaborate with peers (both are subjected to norms) to negotiate learning and teaching norms with teachers (norm-setters) in school. Finally, section 7.5 will discuss the interconnections among the three elements outlined in the conceptual framework in Chapter 3: relational agency, relational constraints, and children's strengths in negotiating social norms and justifying themselves.

7.1 Children's justification and negotiation with peers in accepting and complying with adults' authority

Kevin is a twelve-year-old primary schooler. He is also a day student living with his paternal grandpa. Both of his parents migrated. He often considers that adults' parenting approach at home is strict, as he is only allowed to use his phone on weekends and weekdays after finishing homework. Meanwhile, as he also has unwavering faith in strict parenting in family, he tends to uphold strict ground rules set by teachers in school. Different from other LBC, such as Weiai, Pangolin and Hazel (will be mentioned in section 7.2 and 7.3 below) who consciously resist or bypass adult authority and power in school, Kevin does not consider adults' authority is a constraint for him. Instead, he upholds adults' rules set for him in both family and school settings. He is also the only child in his family. The peers he has close connections with are all in school. He often imposes his actions of strict adherence to the rules set by teachers on his peer classmates, presenting his sense of collectivism (Zhu, 2021b) and citizenship in his class. His collective sense of honour also instills in him a strong sense of responsibility for actions that do not align with the collective interest (Ruble et al., 2003; Wang and Li, 2003) of his class.

Below two extracts KV1 and KV2 demonstrate two steps of his imposition of ground rules set by his *banzhuren* on his peer classmates to safeguard collective interest: 1) justifying the ground rules on behalf of the *banzhuren*; and 2) negotiating normativity with peers when interpersonal conflicts arose. The below extract (KV1) demonstrates the first step:

Me: Do you have any peer-related stories that you want to share with me?

Kevin: I noticed that some classmates brought snacks to school, and they were punished for many times because of that.

Me: How were they punished?

Kevin: Buying the same snack as what they brought to the classroom for everyone. Some of them were fined ¥1, as they did not complete homework at the same time.

Me: Are these ground rules set by your *banzhuren*?

Kevin: (Yes.) From this semester, our *banzhuren* has been enforcing the rules more stringently.

Me: Do they (those who were punished before) hold themselves back after the rules came into effect?

Kevin: Yes, they no longer bring snacks to school.

Me: So, the rules are effective.

Kevin: Yes.

Me: Have you ever been punished before?

Kevin: Never. I receive very strict parenting from my parents and grandparents at home. Also, I think people should be punished when they do things that are not allowed in the first place.

Me: It seems that you are a well-behaved person in your family and school.

Kevin: Thank you for your kind words.

(instant messages, March 2023)

Based on Kevin's justification of and adherence to the *banzhuren*'s no-snack rule in classroom, he began to expect and encourage his peer classmates to follow the same rule when they intended to break it. Hence, Kevin viewed this rule as a social norm that everyone should follow in the classroom, reflecting his compliance with adult authority in school. His sense of compliance remains consistent in both family and school settings.

When dissuading those who attempted to break the no-snack rule, he encountered minor interpersonal conflicts, leading to temporary tensions between himself and classmates who disregarded the rule. However, he can always win them back. Extract KV2 below shows how he negotiated with his classmates regarding the no-snack norm in classroom in the context of interpersonal conflicts:

Me: Have those who were punished before, or those who might be punished soon, ever asked you for help?

Kevin: No.

Me: For example, have they ever asked you to intervene with the *banzhuren* on their behalf so they would not be punished?

Kevin: No. Everyone in our class would stare it out.

Me: What does it mean?

Kevin: Everyone in the class would immediately point it out if they noticed someone bringing snacks.

Me: Does that mean everyone has a tacit agreement on the rule and think that it is right? Does everyone also help the *banzhuren* identify who brings snacks?

Kevin: Yes. We do not want to get ourselves into trouble because of a few rule breakers.

Me: Are you one of those people who usually help the *banzhuren* address the issue of bringing and eating snacks in the classroom?

Kevin: I am.

Me: Are you a member of the class committee?

Kevin: No.

Me: Of course, your *banzhuren* will likely compliment you for strictly following with the rules. However, are there classmates who feel dissatisfied with you because that they think you are on the teacher's side and when you stare them out?

Kevin: Not really. We had grudges before, but we got back together quickly.

Me: It seems that you are a well-connected, sociable young man in school who also upholds strong principles.

(instant messages, March 2023)

From extracts KV1 and KV2, Kevin used the *banzhuren's* authority to practice his relational agency with peers in school. Kevin's and his peers' compliance and enforcement of the ground rules set by the *banzhuren* is considered as within the *banzhuren's* authority and adult-imposed constraint in the classroom. Based on his belief regarding those who break the rules should be punished, Kevin also reinforced his participation in the 'staring it out' (in extract KV2) and 'pointing it out' (in extract KV2) together with his peer classmates in the classroom. In this process, they, including Kevin and his peer classmates, created new collective moral norms among themselves as students, based on the *banzhuren's* pre-established ground rules. The adults' authoritative position remains dominate in Kevin's extracts (Griswold, 2007). This resonates with Griswold's (2007) research which emphasises that children negotiate roles and establish internal order among peers based on existing authoritative criteria. Griswold (2007) also suggests that the criteria might belong to some dominant peers. Even though it is not very clear that whether Kevin and other peer classmates who obey the no-snack rule are the dominant peers, the *banzhuren* in Kevin's extracts is always at a higher authoritative position compared with children's dominant peers. The role that Kevin and his other peer classmates play is more of a peer supervisor to those who tend to break the rule and affect collective interest in the classroom.

No doubt that Kevin and his little supervision team, consisting of himself and his classmates, comply with the *banzhuren's* authority. However, this does not imply that Kevin lacks agency in peer interactions influenced or constrained by adults. In the 'staring it out' (in extract KV2) and 'pointing it out' (in extract KV2) movements, Kevin and his peers justified the rules (considered as norms) that established by the *banzhuren*. They also normalised the rules in their everyday life in the classroom. Their justification of the ground rules also stands for their recognition of the *banzhuren's* authority over them when socialising with peer classmates. As Kevin also endorses the strict parenting in his family and behaves accordingly, his agency enables him to apply strict self-discipline acquired at home to his peers at school, particularly those who seem to be less disciplined than him. He acts as a moral supervisor like his strict parents and grandparents at home to his peers at school, who are often the rule breakers, when endorsing and justifying the *banzhuren's* rules in school. His agency

reflects how he translates his deep-seated belief in strict and conservative norms, shaped within his family, into his peer interactions involving normativity negotiation and justification at school.

It is also worth noting that Kevin is not a member of the class committee⁴⁹. It implies that Kevin could have just ignored snack-bringing and snack-eating behaviours of his peers, which is not Kevin's duty to do so. However, Kevin chose to actively take part in the supervision over his classmates' behaviours. Luckily enough, he had the opportunity and social environment to negotiate with those peers who break rules and convince them to adhere to the rules, with other peers' support. The foundation for him to practice his justification and negotiation is his and his peers' deep and firm trust in adult authority. Also, neither Kevin nor his classmates who were 'stared out' (in extract KV2) or 'pointed out' (in extract KV2) by him held grudges against one another, as they quickly made peace. It is also considered Kevin's ability to negotiate with peers, effectively shortening their relational distance caused by the tensions arising from the implementation of adult-imposed norms. Kevin's justification may primarily involve authenticating adults' rules or adults' constraints, but his negotiation reflects a dual effort: endorsing adult-imposed rules and alleviating related tensions in peer interactions within school.

Adult's authority as a constraint is no longer considered detrimental in children's formation of agency with peers when drawing on Kevin's extracts above. Instead, it facilitates children's practices of agency with peers. Thus, submission to adult's authority and power still provides children with space to practice their agency with peers. In section 7.3 below, however, Hazel and Pangolin's extracts illustrate how they pretended to follow the rules set by teachers while simultaneously detouring around those rules with peers in school. This is also considered as their justification and negotiation, based on the identification of their personal interests which contradict the rules. Hazel and Pangolin worked out the rules set by adults in school by utilising an approach which is completely different from Kevin's.

⁴⁹ It also has been mentioned in Chapter 5, it refers to a group of student leaders that led by the *banzhuren* in a class (Zhu, 2021a). Normally this group of students help the *banzhuren* to manage the whole class in all aspects, such as supervising fellow students' academic performance, physical exercise, entertainment activities and general affairs (Li and Chen, 2013; Hansen, 2014). So, they have different roles in the line of duty. Especially, the class monitor helps to manage almost everything in general as what the *banzhuren* might do (Liu et al., 2018).

Similar to Kevin, another participant, Grace (pseudonym), who serves as a class monitor, also demonstrated her compliant agency when negotiating normalised and fixed duties with her peer colleagues who are also members of the class committee. In supporting their *banzhuren* in managing the whole class, it is evident that both Grace and Kevin's compliance with adult authority stems from their acknowledgment of the well-organised and disciplined structure rooted in teachers' authority within their schools. Below is the extract (GA1) from Grace, showing her strength in negotiating norms with her peer colleagues under their *banzhuren's* supervision when working as a class monitor:

Me: So, I just wondered what is your experience of being a class monitor?

Grace: I am proud of myself.

Me: That is great. It seems that you enjoy what you do as a class monitor. Have you ever been involved in any interpersonal conflicts, or have you ever worked to mitigate one as a class monitor?

Grace: That is the responsibility of our commissaries in mental well-being.

Me: You have more than one in your class?

Grace: Yes. We have two of them to help our classmates.

Me: So, as a class monitor, how do you see your responsibilities in comparison to those of the commissaries in mental well-being?

Grace: So many. For example, ensuring proper discipline during classes, collecting homework marked by teachers and returning to our classmates, organising the class team during the flag-raising ceremony⁵⁰, and many others. Sometimes, our *banzhuren* also asked other commissaries to help me when I have too many tasks to do.

Me: impressive! Your *banzhuren* is very responsible and considerate. I just wondered how you negotiate with your peer colleagues regarding distributing these tasks that originally assigned to you as the class monitor?

Grace: When there are too many notebooks to collect from the teachers' office, our deputy class monitor helps me.

Me: Do you regularly organise committee meetings? If so, what do you usually discuss with your peer colleagues?

Grace: Yes. Sometimes, within the help of our *banzhuren*. Sometimes, we do it on our own. We normally discuss what we could do to maintain the discipline for the whole class, and how to improve our learning efficacy as a collective not just individuals' progresses. Every commissary can have a say.

Me: I think this is very creative to engage every commissary to contribute to the very important part: study. I thought that only you, the deputy class monitor, all the course representatives, and the commissary in studies will be counted to do so. This is normally the case. Is this your suggestion to engage everyone in the committee meetings?

Grace: In fact, not just me. The deputy class monitor, the commissary in studies and me, three of us have come up with this, considering that everyone is very competent to contribute. We consider that our other colleagues from the committee might have more ideas that three of us might have not thought about.

Me: That is incredible! Sometimes, some committee members are reluctant to share their responsibilities with others, as they consider their duties as an honour that can attract praise from teachers.

Grace: That is not the case in our class. There is a strong sense of collective harmony among us, which our *banzhuren* has been advocating since she become our *banzhuren*.

⁵⁰ In Chinese characters: 升旗仪式. In mandarin pinyin: *sheng qi yishi*. It is a ceremony that gathers all students in Chinese public schools to pay respect to and salute (if counted as members of the Youth League) to national flag arose usually by student members of the Communist Youth League affiliated with public schools, which is a significant part of Chinese patriotic education emphasizing collective identity (Gu et al., 2017a).

Drawing on Kevin and Grace's extracts above, they both acted as the spokesperson for teacher's authority in school. It seems that their agency parallels with adult's authority, which is not fundamentally destructive to the latter. However, their actions in justifying and negotiating rules and duties that set and led by adults with their peers in school are also regarded a type of their relational agency in peer relationships. Their agency also lies in their reconstruction or extension of the social norms embedded with adults' authority in school. Kevin's and Grace's practises of justification and negotiation are advantageously compliant with, rather than subversive to adult's authority. Hence, I reckon that subverting is not the only option for children and young people to practice their agency in their social interactions with peers when adults' authority is also present. At the same time, their compliance to adult's authority does not prevent their relational agency from thriving. In all, when endorsing adult's authority, there are rooms for children to assert their voices and agency among peers.

Other than these negotiations taken place in school, family is another social context where children can negotiate norms with peers. In extract SH1 appeared in Chapter 5, Sophia persuaded her younger sister who used to hang out with gangsters and was disobedient and mischievous to parents' education. Sophia's persuasion also asserted their parents' authority. The norms in this family for children include being obedient children who are also serious about their potential pathways to a promising future, which Sophia always upheld. However, Sophia noticed a huge difference between herself and her younger sister. So, Sophia justified the norms by taking relevant actions to persuade her younger sister, hoping that she could also respect these norms set up for the two children by their migrant parents. Similar to Kevin and Grace, as mentioned above, Sophia is agentic enough to tell the wisdom of adults' decision-making which impacts their futures. So, the three participants were found to be agentic to negotiate and justify adult-imposed norms with peers in both school and family settings. However, different from Grace, Kevin and Sophia's justifications and negotiations were found to be more persuasive to those peers who do not respect the norms set by adults. Meanwhile, Grace tended to negotiate normalised workloads and inspire more collective and creative work patterns with her peer colleagues on the class committee, who, I assumed, already

acknowledged adult's wisdom. The above discussion further reinforces my argument that children's agency can be understood as their compliance with adults and their authority, rather than as rebellion that causes trouble for adults. Children's peers in this context either play the role of rule breakers or are individuals who, like the participants mentioned above, also respect and comply with adults' authority.

To summarise, LBC demonstrated agency in negotiating social norms endorsed by adults and upheld by LBC themselves in their interactions with peers at schools and within their families. Their negotiation and justification tend to align with the rules or norms advocated by adults, rather than challenging or subverting these norms. Unlike what was presented in this section, sections 7.2, 7.3, and 7.4 reveal that such negotiation and justification can also be subversive to some norms that are detrimental or unacceptable to children.

7.2 Children's direct and subversive justification and negotiation in relation to detrimental norms during interactions with peers

In this section, I will draw on extracts from Weiai, Hazel, Amy, Charlotte and Hayden to manifest their negotiation of social norms and their self-justifications in a voiced or confrontational way, based on their sense of social inequality arose from their interactions with peers involving adults. I title it as their subversive justification and negotiation as they practice their relational agency in an apparently conspicuous way to demonstrate their oppositional attitudes toward these unequal norms, which are seen as relational constraints imposed by both peers and adults. Their negotiation and justification are also recognised as a type of their relational agency, which contradicts with some existing school policies or family social norms. Compared to compliant negotiation and justification discussed in section 7.1 above, this section address children's negotiation and justification which appear to be destructive to these imposed constraints which are regarded as detrimental norms.

Also, extracts WA2, WA3 are new extracts utilised in this section. Other extracts are from some of the participants previously introduced in Chapter 5 and 6, as children's subversion of certain norms emerged in those chapters. Furthermore, children's subversion of norms reflects their different attitudes toward unfair impositions embedded within these norms.

Other than the living conditions addressed in section 6.1 of Chapter 6, Weiai had migrated with her parents to another province and lived with them together for a while. As an immigrant from an area considered by locals to be less developed, Weiai had experienced discrimination as a floating child (Mu, 2019). Even though migration is very common in contemporary China, discrimination against migrant workers and their children is also a widespread social phenomenon (Alam and He, 2022). Weiai's experience demonstrated her awareness of and her rejection to these discriminations normalised (Fang, 2020) by local people met in school. She also received help from a small group of her peer classmates when living away from hometown. Her prior migration experience later influenced her agency in peer interactions during her current life as a left-behind child.

In extract WA2 below, it illustrates how Weiai practiced her agency by justifying herself when facing discrimination instigated by her *banzhuren* and subsequently perpetuated among her classmates. The discriminations that they made against her are regarded as certain detrimental norms some local people usually hold to judge migrants and their children, containing anti-migrant discourses (Qian, 2019):

Me: Can you share what your migration experience was like and how it impacts your life now?

Weiai: After I migrated to another province with my parents, they transferred me to a new school. I could not keep up with my classmates in study, specifically in English. They have been learning English since year two in primary school, but it was different from my former school⁵¹ before migration. Pupils back in my hometown usually start learning English from year three. That was why I could not catch up with my classmates and always got bad results at that time. My former *banzhuren* also teased me in front of all the classmates. Some of my former classmates even mocked her to blame me for dragging the class average scores down, preventing my class from surpassing other classes in academic performance, which they took very seriously⁵². Both the *banzhuren* and the classmates who sided with her even suspected me of theft when someone's belongings went missing. They assumed I was the thief simply because I was not performing well academically. I do not think that academic performance should be linked to someone's moral character. Also, it was unfair to blame me for every bad incident that happened in the class during my short stay there.

Me: Indeed, I totally agree with you. Sometimes, people become overly obsessed with academic performance and the competition that comes with it.

Weiai: Exactly. The *banzhuren* did something even more excessive. I still remember one day when she came to dine at my parents' hotpot restaurant with other teachers from my

⁵¹ Regional educational arrangements may vary in different provinces to advocate local educational characteristics, but reflecting the unequal distribution of educational resources which is closely related to the unevenness in economic growth in China (Fleisher et al., 2010). Parental migration for a better education for their children has been proven to be their urgent needs (Hu, 2019).

⁵² This can be explained by a contradiction between the cultures of collectivism and individualism in Chinese classrooms (Zhu, 2021b). Chinese children's academic performance is often associated with their consciousness of class collectivism (Hansen, 2014; Zhu, 2019). If they do not perform well academically, they may be blamed for damaging the collective honour of the entire class, as both students and teachers place significant value on academic performance and associate it with a sense of collectivism. Weiai's classmates also tie their individual interests to the collective honour of the whole class. But teacher's accusations lead to criticism from Weiai's peers, as they knew that Weiai was merely a student struggling academically. She did not display any misconduct.

former school. She criticised me in front of her colleagues without realising that I was there, helping my parents with their business. I overheard everything they said when standing behind the kitchen curtain with my parents. Despite hearing all the nasty comments, I still served them the dishes they ordered. I noticed the awkwardness on her face when she realised I was present. But she continued saying unpleasant things about me even after the atmosphere grew tense. Considering her position of authority in education, my parents endured the situation and refrained from confronting her. Even some of her colleagues tried to persuade her to stop, but she persisted until they all left.

Me: This was indeed, too much.

(instant messages, September 2022)

From Weiai's further detailed descriptions from our text messages, right after this incident happened, Weiai only felt wronged but decided to keep it private. Weiai often went to a park near where she resided with her parents for many times and sobbed on her own toward a tree. It was just because that she noticed the hardship of her parents to run the small family business as migrants and the quarrels at home that they often ignited, she refused to bother them and seek help anymore.

Luckily enough, she also received support from her former who defended her good behaviour and sound moral characters in front of the *banzhuren* and the classmates who judged her. Weiai drew strength from these supportive peers, which further helped her challenge the unfair treatments she faced. The support she received from a small group of peers in class enabled her to reject the discriminatory norms led by the *banzhuren*. As this strength grew, Weiai also developed a sense of justification and negotiation, empowering her to challenge certain adult-incited norms enforced by both peers and teachers. Over time, she also learned to extend her support to others facing similar situations. The extract below (WA3) illustrates her transition from hopelessness and frustration to a state of empowerment and self-reliance. It highlights how she drew justification from her former classmates to negotiate new norms when extending support to others:

Me: I felt so sad when you shared your schooling experience during migration. I think that your former classmates in your class were influenced by the *banzhuren*. Adults should not do that because they might not be aware of the negative consequences. I just wondered how you managed to get through all the unpleasant memories you mentioned, if you do not mind me asking?

Weiai: My friends who were my former class supported me and protected me from others' groundless accusations or bad attitudes toward me. When such things happened, my friends knew that I was not what I was judged. They just stood up for me and told everyone, including the *banzhuren*, that I was not a thief. They also clarified that it was not my fault in performing poorly in English. When I fell into self-doubt because of the *banzhuren* and the other classmates who judged me, my friends deliberately justified and clarified everything for me. When they did not trust me, my friends put trust in me, firmly. Since then, I have felt safe. I am very lucky to have them in my life.

Me: I am so glad that you have such amazing friends who knew the truth and were willing to support you, even at the risk of opposing those classmates and even the *banzhuren*.

Weiai: It was not easy for them to support me, indeed. They claimed that I was innocent amidst these doubts. I have always appreciated their help and decided to help others who find themselves in similar situations.

Me: Even if it is just a few people, having their support means you are not powerless.

Weiai: Yes. When I returned to my hometown and re-joined my old school, I noticed that some of my classmates were going through similar hardships as I did as a migrant. So, I choose to help them, just like what my friends did for me.

Me: This strength has been passed on by you and your peers, and it will continue to bring more positive impact on others.

(instant messages, September 2022)

Multiple constraints imposed by LBC's peers and adults manifest the importance of what impacts peer relations and shape children's relational agency in peer relationships, as discussed in Chapter 6. From the relevant discussions of constraints in Chapter 6, and the two extracts above from Weiai, it is evident that LBC face challenges in identifying and justifying their thoughts and actions, particularly when these conflict with what they were previously instructed to uphold, such as obedience to adults and their authority without doubts in family and school settings. Meanwhile, adults are regarded as the more powerful influence in shaping and guiding children's justification and negotiation in relation to detrimental social norms, compared to children's peers.

Moreover, when revisiting extract WA1 in Chapter 6, Weiai was found agentic to negotiate norms associated with birth order and gender bias in her family with her surrogate parent (paternal grandma), after reflecting her social behaviours with her younger male cousin in family. Her agency to justify herself and negotiate these detrimental norms with peers and adults developed gradually into self-reliance, influenced by what she learnt from her former classmates who supported her during her migration. Thus, it takes time for children to acquire and practise their self-justified agency with peers under adults' multiple constraints. Children's peers who align with these detrimental norms advocated by adults can further complicate the situation, making it even more challenging for children to voice their concerns or assist others in voicing theirs among peers. However, LBC are agentic enough to navigate the detriments of adult-imposed constraints and take actions to subvert them in a vocal manner that directly attracts people's attention.

Similar to extract WA1, in extract HL3 from Chapter 6, Hazel explained herself to her grandpa regarding his unfounded accusation when her younger sister treated her as a scapegoat. Weiai and Hazel's self-clarifications or self-

explanations can be understood as justifications of their upright and honest social behaviors in peer interactions within their families. These actions also represent their responses to both adult-imposed and peer-imposed constraints in the family setting. Their justification and negotiation involve direct confrontations with adults, as both actively defended their innocence in the presence of their surrogate parents. Simultaneously, they also negotiated detrimental norms straightforwardly with adults within the family setting.

Hazel's self-justification with her grandpa can also be understood as her negotiation with grandpa. Even the opposite negotiator is an adult, her negotiation impacted her peer interactions with her younger sister, as adults also represent discursive power or right to speak in front of children and their peers. Additionally, if Hazel can impact adult's authority or power, it can perhaps help her end unfair treatments (also seen as relational constraints) made by both her grandpa and her younger sister. Hazel's negotiation and justification further demonstrate her relational agency in peer relationships.

Drawing on extract AM from Chapter 6, Amy was also aware of the negative aspects of adult-imposed expectations, even though she remained silent in front of her surrogate parents and parents. Amy's awareness of these normalised detriments embedded in adults' expectations of her can be regarded as her recognition of the inequality stemming from adults' partiality to younger children in the family. It might later formulate her normativity negotiation and self-justification to these imposed expectations that she declined but had to endure.

When referring further to Chapter 5, in extract CE, Charlotte described herself as a *mulaohu* with a sense of self-mockery when confronting with the five annoying boys in her class. As also addressed in Chapter 5, *mulaohu* usually contains a negative connotation with a general societal expectation for women and girls to be quiet, gentle, and empathetic in a society which inclines to be patriarchy-dominated, like China (Shu et al., 2013). So, it is evident from her viewpoint that her self-defense in subverting the annoying boys' frequent harassment in the classroom appears to be going against this type of social norm preinstalled for women and girls in Chinese society. Nonetheless, Charlotte was proud of herself for taking brave actions to confront the five boys, as they rarely targeted her after realising that she is tough. Thus, What Charlotte subverted was her male classmates' constraint imposed on her.

Through her acts of revenge against her male classmates, she sought to negotiate and project the image of a strong girl who cannot be easily provoked or bullied. Similar to Weiai and Hazel, Charlotte's negotiation of normativity with her classmates is also subversive, direct, and characterized by a voiced confrontation. Her confrontation also aligns with feminist approaches in debates on females' normativity negotiation, as discussed in section 3.3.1 of Chapter 3.

In extract HN1 from Chapter 5, Hayden demonstrated her strength by subverting her older sister's authority within their family when her sister attempted to impose constraints on her. In Hayden's case, the social norm she directly negotiated in confrontation with her older sister was the seniority and authority traditionally associated with birth order. Hayden's direct confrontation with her older sister, as discussed in HN1, can also be viewed as an example of her subversive negotiation of normativity with peers.

When revisiting extracts HN2 and HN3 from Chapter 5, although Hayden was found to be agentic in negotiating family authority linked to birth order with her older sister, she also expressed her concerns about the reasons why she remained silent upon hearing gossip about herself, spread by a self-proclaimed sister at school. It seems that Hayden did not negotiate anything with the gossip in school. However, she certainly was able to differentiate peer groups in varying social contexts to make her own decisions when interacting with peers. As confirmed by Hayden, it was unnecessary to engage in a negotiation or self-clarification with the gossip. From her viewpoint, the gossip might not be as tolerant as her relatives, such as, her older sister. That is why she preferred silences over voices. So, direct confrontations involving normativity negotiation seem unnecessary for some children in certain circumstances. Below are the reasons why Hayden's normativity negotiations differ.

Here are the norms that linked to Hayden's differentiated reactions to peers from family and school: 1) the gossip was recognised as *wairen*⁵³; and 2) her sister was considered someone who typically does not dwell on minor social tensions that arise between them. Thus, Hayden felt safe and trusted that her older sister would not hold grudges if she did things that failed to align with her sister's expectations of her, as a senior family member typically would. Her

⁵³ *Wairen* was explained in footnote number 47 in section 5.4, Chapter 5.

understanding of social closeness and distance is rooted in Chinese norms and social culture, as discussed above and in section 5.4 of Chapter 5, shaping her different attitudes toward normativity negotiation with both the gossipier and her older sister.

Overall, LBC explicitly demonstrated their capacity to subvert certain norms deemed detrimental and/or unacceptable during interactions with peers in both family and school settings. These norms were shown to be endorsed by both peers, and adults who influenced their peer relationships. Apart from this type of explicit demonstration, some LBC also exercise their relational agency by tactfully and subtly negotiating norms and justifying related social behaviours with their peers, adopting approaches that are implicit. Section 7.3 below will discuss how they work around rules, seen as norms, when socialising with peers.

7.3 Detouring around rules: children's tactful and subtle approaches to justifying and negotiating normativity when with peers

As discussed at the end of section 7.2, Hayden had selective participation when encountering detrimental norms in peer relationships. Close or distant peers influenced her decisions on whether to voice herself or directly confront peers to subvert the constraints imposed by them, which were embedded within certain social normativity. It then led me to wonder if there are additional reasons why, even when LBC are aware of certain detrimental norms, they still choose to remain silent or take their actions quietly. It implies that their active participation in defending their personal interests, which go against detrimental norms, might not be openly expressed by them to raise awareness or address the conflictual issues that arise. There must be reasons or actions that lead them to hold back from direct confrontations, possibly as a strategy to protect their personal interests in a manner they find acceptable. Thus, I will use four extracts from Pangolin and Hazel to explore how they work around ground rules set by teachers, when negotiating new norms with peers.

Extracts PG4 and PG5 below were generated from Pangolin's texts messages. As introduced in section 5.3 of Chapter 5, Pangolin became significantly more involved in his school life with peers after becoming a boarder and living with several roommates during his transition from junior middle school to senior middle school (high school). Playing a round of Truth or Dare also boosted his

confidence in peer interactions. Extract PG4 below highlights how Pangolin justified his worldviews and negotiated his dominant social position with peers through the game and his successful experience of pursuing relationships with girls in real life through a dare:

Pangolin: He (the boy who lost the game as mentioned in section 5.3 of Chapter 5) is one of my roommates. He feels very sad and jealous of me after the game. Ha-ha.

Me: Why you chose to play this game by the way? Who started it and what motivated you?

Pangolin: Well, you know, lads' game. Sometimes, we obsessed with games. One day, he just came up with this game. I was also interested in it. And I thought if I asked, she would say yes to me. I was pretty sure about that. So, I chose to take part in the game. I do not want that happen to me before entering a game.

Me: Sounds like you only play games where you feel you have a winning chance.

Pangolin: Yes, although it was sad that he lost, I could not help but feel happy to be in love. I won the game and the girl at the same time. Somehow, winning the game shows that I am attractive to someone. But he has been upset since then. Other of my roommates and brothers from neighbour dorms have been trying to help him get over it. We have been working together, cracking jokes to cheer him up. We suggested him to move on. We also told him to not dwell on it but learn from it.

Me: Good brotherhood vibes over there. Now, you have a voice in conversations about girls at dorm, I guess. Wining your girlfriend sets you as a great example in front of everyone. You have shown your capacity, to some extent.

Pangolin: Yes, that is why he is so jealous, sometimes even boiling with rage when we joke about his failure in that game. He just could not make any changes, even we have tried to cheer him up.⁵⁴

(instant messages, October 2022)

The norm that Pangolin negotiated with his roommates is the widely recognised prohibition against early dating or romantic relationships in his high school. For Pangolin, the act of building a romantic relationship itself represents a subversion of this norm established by his teachers at school. By participating in the game with his roommates, he initially demonstrated his capacity by justifying that romantic relationships are attainable and that girls are approachable. After Pangolin's significant win in the game, he began to take on the role of a mentor for his roommate, cheering him up and offering him life lessons. This came after the roommate lost a dare and faced relational challenges when the girl he approached not only rejected him but also refused to remain their friendship (as illustrated in section 5.3 of Chapter 5). Somehow, Pangolin gained a sense of authority and influence in conversations with this roommate who had lost. This type of informal peer mentoring, I argue, is also considered as a form of children's negotiation for a dominant position in peer relationships. Another norm that he justified and negotiated during his peer mentoring with the

⁵⁴ He had a tinge of pride or proud of himself by using a relevant emoji on WeChat.

roommate is playing safe and letting go of winning and losing quickly in games, as shown in the above extract PG4.

Also, his justification of building a romantic relationship at high school stage is evident in extract PG5 below, when he acknowledged that high schoolers could juggle academic performance and romantic relationship. In addition, he applied the playing safe strategy to avoid drawing teachers' attention, as early dating was not allowed. Thus, he took actions when remaining silent toward teachers, effectively detouring around the no early dating norm advocated by the school. The playing safe strategy was also employed by Pangolin to handle disruptions caused by peer hecklers who attempted to expose his romantic relationship to teachers through teasing or joking. This occurred after both Pangolin and the girl were recognised among their peer classmates as a committed couple. The extract PG5 below illustrates Pangolin's negotiation within his romantic relationship and his strategies for maintaining discretion when rejecting peer hecklers. This was done under the watchful eyes of teachers, who typically disapprove of early romantic relationships, also referred to as *zaolian*, in the context of Chinese schools (Xiang, 2023):

Me: I think your teachers might not allow the so called '*zaolian*'⁵⁵. They are still very old school and are very strict about heterosexual relationships appear in high school.

Pangolin: Yes. After we have been together (he and his girlfriend), there were some hecklers who always kicked up a fuss about our relationship, like in public when teachers were still there. However, my girlfriend and I we always have kept a low profile, so I bet teachers have not known it yet. We have been hiding it from them very well (behaving well on the surface).

Me: And, I can see that you are working very hard at the same time on your study as well. So, *zaolian* does not always end up with getting lower grades as what teachers usually assume as that does not apply to everyone. Am I right? If you could manage both, why not? Missing out on that girl might lead to regrets about my high school experience. Adults should trust us more in our management skills.

Pangolin: For sure. Everyone still prioritises study in my class. My girlfriend is doing better than me in academic performance. I am working on catching up with her. I think we can encourage each other to perform better together.

Me: And, going to the same university hand-in-hand. Sounds like a very good plan.

Pangolin: Exactly.

(instant messages, October 2022)

Compared with other participants that were mentioned in section 7.2, Pangolin's justification and negotiation with peers in subverting adult-imposed no early dating norm in school appeared to be more tactful and subtle to adults, rather than conflictual and confrontational. Drawing on extracts PG4 and PG5,

⁵⁵ In Chinese Characters: 早恋. *Zaolian* refers to early dating among young people from elementary and secondary schools in China, which is not encouraged by family, school and even the state (Shen, 2015; Feng, 2020). Schools in China often have relevant regulations to tackle *zaolian* which is usually seen as a serious social problem affecting minors or adolescents' healthy growth (Shen, 2015).

Pangolin consistently sought to maximise benefits and minimise potential harms in his justification and negotiation with peers. On one hand, by actively participating in the game, he made it clear that he would only join if he was confident of winning. On the other hand, in defending his established romantic relationship against unwanted attention from peer hecklers, he maintained a low profile. Even though all his playing safe and playing sure strategies appeared subtle to adults, they remained active and influential among peers, demonstrating his normativity negotiation and justification within peer interactions in school.

Other than negotiating with peers based on adult-imposed norms, Pangolin also mentored his roommate who lost the game, attempting to help him normalise failure in such contexts. This is regarded as Pangolin's active participation in justifying and negotiating new norms arising from his own beliefs about fostering a collective school life within the dorm.

When further examining the reasons behind Pangolin's justification and negotiation with peers based on adult-imposed norms, it becomes evident that children might refrain from voicing themselves if they perceive their personal interests as being in conflict with widely accepted norms advocated by adults.

Furthermore, on the surface, children's actions may appear unconflictual and peaceful, particularly if adults remain unaware of their private negotiations and the reasons for holding back. However, children may intentionally exclude adults from these negotiations, as adult involvement could disrupt the vested interests children derive from their peer interactions—such as Pangolin's dual success in the game and his romantic relationship. These benefits represent direct gains for children when practicing agency among peers. Achieving such benefits often requires effort to subvert adults' normalised constraints.

Moreover, it becomes evident that detouring around adult-advocated norms may itself constitute children's negotiation of norms with adults. This negotiation, however, remains silent to adults, enabling children to protect their interests while maintaining the appearance of compliance.

When taking a detour around these adult-imposed norms, Hazel demonstrated her strategies to seek help and collaboration from friends in school, formulating as her own ways of justifying herself and negotiating with peers. The extracts below (HL4 and HL5) illustrate how Hazel collaborated with trusted friends to

discreetly navigate around the prohibition of smartphones in her classroom. The rule impacted Hazel's vested interests in relation to smartphone use. Similar to Pangolin, Hazels' normativity negotiation is also tactful and subtle. All of Hazel's workarounds were identified when demystifying one of her WeChat Moments posts considering her mobile phone use, as detailed in extract HL4 below:

Me: Hello, how are you lately? I noticed that you posted something on WeChat Moments saying that your old WeChat account will not be used regularly⁵⁶. May I get to know why? And may I have your new contact on WeChat to continue the research?

Hazel: Not really. That was a fake announcement to divert my *banzhuren's* attention away from me. The other day, I brought my smartphone to school, and my teacher caught me using it. So, she asked me to hand in the phone as a confiscation⁵⁷, as phone is normally not allowed in my school. However, I gave her my spare phone, on which I added her on WeChat. The spare phone is an old one, which can only support one WeChat account logged in due to version restrictions. I regularly update my WeChat Moments, but I try to avoid drawing my teacher's attention by posting something like that before giving her my spare phone, so that she would not find out that I actually have two phones. She might believe that I am not that active online from now on due to the confiscation situation.

Me: So smart, using spare phone to divert the *banzhuren's* attention! I almost fell for that! I never thought about using a spare phone when I was your age.

Hazel: Actually, the spare phone does not function well, so I just gave it to her anyway.

Me: It seems that people always come up with countermeasures whenever a policy is released⁵⁸, or even just a simple ground rule in class.

Hazel: Yes, as always. Also, I played it safe by asking one of my friends to take my smart phone—the one I regularly use—out of school and hand it to a staff member at the canteen where I often dine near the school. My *banzhuren* asked me to hand in my smartphone during our after-school programs⁵⁹, but not immediately. Also, my friend did not sign up for the program, so she can leave school a bit earlier than me and take my phone out of school before the scheduled confiscation. I think my *banzhuren* thought that I gave her the one that I use regularly, not the spare one. How can she tell the difference anyway. It turned out that she even did not check the spare phone during the after-school program!

Me: I could not wait to hear more about this spare phone strategy! How did you come up with such a brilliant plan? Or was it something someone else taught you? Do not worry, I do not know your *banzhuren*, so there is no way that I could report you. I am just genuinely curious as an outsider.

Hazel: On the day I was caught by my *banzhuren*, I happened to have a spare phone with me, so I planned to hand it over to her when she caught me.

Me: How many of you in your class have been caught using phones?

⁵⁶ By asking her this question, I was also confirming that which account will be used more often by Hazel. I can then make sure that I have her active WeChat contact to continue my research with her.

⁵⁷ There is no fixed confiscation policy for Chinese schools (Gao et al., 2014). *Banzhuren* is the often the one who decides when to return the confiscated phone back to students. It may take few days, one semester or even just one day for students to get their phones back, as there is still significant controversy surrounding school phone policies (Gao et al., 2017).

⁵⁸ It is an idiom commonly used in China. In Chinese characters: 上有政策, 下有对策. In Mandarin pinyin: *shang you zhengce, xia you duice*. It literally means where there is a rule, there is a workaround. It also refers to a phenomenon that people know how to deal with some newly released policies which restrain their formerly enjoyed benefits (Anon, n.d.). It originally contains negative connotations, but I use it in an affirmative way in the text messages with Hazel to acknowledge her ability to tactfully navigate the no-phone rule. By illustrating this prevalent social norm in school, this phrase similes the phone-banning policy and Hazel's countermeasures. The intention of using this phrase reflects my viewpoint on the phone-banning policy. I think it does not always succeed in drawing students' attention back to the classroom or in ensuring they behave well on the surface. If teachers fail to consider children's current living conditions, where mobile phones are essential for maintaining relationships and gaining emotional support from peers, then banning phones in schools becomes pointless.

⁵⁹ Usually, LBCs are required to join in such programme. This is a programme launched by public schools to tackle LBC safety issues during out-of-school hours while childcare is considered as insufficient (Yiu and Yun, 2017). The programme extends LBC's school hours for them to work on their homework with teachers surrounded to ask questions (Chen et al., 2018). Hazel's peers, who are non-LBCs, are not required to opt in the programme, so that is why Hazel can make use of this school policy and get help from her non-LBC peers.

Hazel: I only remembered that two of us using spare phones to deal with our *banzhuren's* checks. The girl who helped me to take my phone out of school and I, just two of us. On the phone I use more frequently, there are so many important contacts of my friends who mean a lot to me! I do not want to lose them all on WeChat by handing the phone over to my *banzhuren*.

(instant messages, March 2023)

By initiating the conversation above with Hazel, I also asked her about the post to divert her *banzhuren's* attention on WeChat Moments privately via text messages, instead of commenting directly on her post. Using WeChat Moments posts help get closer with my participants, which is normally considered as a good way to maintain social relationships with others (Wu et al., 2022; Nie et al., 2023). As the same time, my WeChat Moments was open to all of my participants so that they can explore more about me. COVID-19 prevented me from meeting them and getting to know them in person. However, conducting fieldwork on WeChat helped create an even safer place for children to talk about things that they might hold back in the presence of teachers. Drawing on extract HL4 above, it seems that using online social media to conduct research with children and young people is a valuable method for gaining deeper insights into their daily lives.

In extract HL4, Hazel negotiated the no-phone policy at school with both her teacher and her friend through her participation in devising strategies to avoid confiscation. The no-phone policy is considered as a norm, as well as a ground rule established by adults, aimed at preventing children from excessive phone usage that might negatively affect their academic performance (Bai et al., 2020). However, from Hazel's perspective, this policy conflicted with her intention to preserve all the contact information of her friends on WeChat. Her personal interests, stemming from her close interactions with friends on WeChat, also conflicted with the no-phone policy typically advocated by teachers in school. Furthermore, her normativity negotiations with adults and peers respectively lie in posting an unusual WeChat update and seeking help from her friend who did not sign up for the same after-school program. Hazel successfully received help from her friend through her negotiation directly with her friend, which arose in response to the no-phone policy.

In addition, Hazel's negotiation also appeared to be tactful and subtle to her *banzhuren*. Even though Hazel was aware of her *banzhuren's* seemingly clumsy reaction to her coping strategies, as addressed in extract HL4 above, there was no evidence either to demonstrate that the *banzhuren* did it

intentionally in response to Hazel's silent negotiation with her friend in a similarly tactful and subtle manner. It is not evident either whether the teacher was aware of Hazel's negotiation with her friend. However, I argue that the *banzhuren* left room for Hazel to devise coping strategies with her peers in school, as the *banzhuren* neither confiscated Hazel's phone immediately upon catching her using it nor verified if the phone handed over was the one Hazel frequently used, as addressed in extract HL4 above. Furthermore, from my viewpoint, the *banzhuren* was merely issuing a warning to Hazel for breaking the no-phone rule, likely attempting to strike an appropriate balance between asserting adult authority and addressing children's behaviors that violate classroom ground rules. Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that adults are not always entirely opposed to children's negotiation with peers, even when such negotiation involves tactfully breaking the rules.

Also, Hazel enjoyed what she achieved from her successful negotiation with both the *banzhuren* and her friend. During her negotiation, she also justified her use of mobile phones by sharing her coping strategies for avoiding confiscation with her friend. Her friend also applied Hazel's strategies to handle a similar situation herself. The extract below (HL5) illustrates the details:

Me: I assume that the two of you are very close, given that you both handled the situation in a similar way.

Hazel: Yes. We are close friends. When I told her about what I did, she took my advice to avoid confiscation. She said that I put all my intelligence to good use, even though everyone knows that my academic performance in school is poor.

Me: Ha-ha, I think you are indeed very smart! I do not think academic performance matters that much nowadays. It is not the only path to success in life. Also, I think confiscating and banning mobile phones in school are not always good.

Hazel: I strongly agree with what you just said.

Me: I think teachers should also consider the potential consequences that these ground rules might imply.

Hazel: Indeed!

Me: Did the *banzhuren* know that it was your spare phone?

Hazel: Even she knows, I bet she cannot do anything about it. I think she understands that I still need at least one to contact my parents. However, I have decided not to bring any of my phones to school anymore, so she will not have anything to say about it.

(instant messages, March 2023)

When negotiating with her friend who also was caught using spare phone regarding how to cope with a confiscation, Hazel successfully impressed her friend who helped her remove her phone from the school. When Hazel's friend encountered the similar situation herself, she followed what Hazel had done with a successful outcome.

Although Hazel clearly expressed concerns about whether her *banzhuren* would

find out what she had done to avoid confiscation, she also justified using her phone at school—where phone-banning is considered the norm—by explaining that, as a left-behind child, she also needs her phone to stay in contact with her migrant parents.

When reflecting on Pangolin's extract in this section about keeping his romantic relationship with his girlfriend as a secret from his *banzhuren*, his actions resonate with Hazel's strategies for managing the risk of her mobile phone being confiscated. They both demonstrated their strategies to protect their immediate interests involving their emotional attachments with peers, which are considered as being constrained by rules set by teachers in school. Their ways of the world contain their understanding and actions based on norms in school, when try to maintain continuous connections with peers both in a safe manner. Indeed, they have their reasons for not directly confronting adults to negotiate their immediate interests involving peers when violating certain seemingly conservative school norms. But I argue that direct negotiation requires more efforts, compared to circumventing these norms.

Unlike Pangolin, who primarily relied on himself in negotiating and justifying the no-early-dating norm in school, Hazel sought and received peer support to negotiate the no-mobile-phone norm in school. However, the similarity in their negotiations and justifications lies not only in their shared strategy of playing it safe under adults' constraints but also in their influence on peers by mentoring or advising them based on their own successful experiences.

When referencing to extract EC, previously discussed in section 5.2 of Chapter 5, Eric intentionally lost some points in a table tennis match against his friend, a member of the school team, to secure a spot to play. From Eric's perspective, this action ensured his friend would not be upset when preserving his friend's self-esteem and dignity as an official team player, avoiding the embarrassment of losing to an amateur like Eric. In return, the friend continued to offer Eric a place to play when table tennis spots were limited at school. This action demonstrates Eric's successful negotiation with his friend, reflecting a reciprocal and altruistic approach.

Simultaneously, when comparing extract EC recapped above with extracts PG4, PG5, HL4 and HL5 from this section, it is evident that three of the participants involved took a detour around certain rules or norms in school when interacting

with peers to fulfill their immediate personal interests. However, Eric's negotiation focused more on working around rules set by peers at school, whereas Pangolin's and Hazel's negotiations and justifications primarily revolved around navigating rules imposed by adults. Additionally, intentionally losing some points to this friend provided Eric with long-term benefits, as the friend could consistently secure a spot for Eric to play by lending his official player identity. Even though Eric prioritised his immediate interests over friendship, he also preserved both her friend's face⁶⁰ in front of a group of seemingly less skilled table tennis enthusiasts and secured a spot, which his friend would offer him to play when availability was limited. Thus, both Pangolin and Eric demonstrated their own unique strategies, understood as part of their relational agency, when negotiating with peers to achieve mutual benefits and secure double win for both them and their peers.

To summarise, LBC can implicitly negotiate norms and justify their related social behaviours in peer interactions in school by subtly detouring around norms established by both teachers and peers.

7.4 Negotiating child-adult social normativity collectively with peers

Unlike section 7.1, sections 7.2 and 7.3 demonstrated children's normativity negotiations and their related justifications cantered on norms perceived as compromising their individual interests. This perception drove their subversive responses to these norms within school and family settings. Also, LBC's sense of inequality arose from their understanding of norms practiced and advocated by peers and adults surrounding them. They actively engaged in the negotiation of normativity and the justification of their understanding and negotiation-relevant social behaviours, often demonstrated through their independent actions and occasionally collective efforts.

Even though this section will also examine children's subversive moves against adult-imposed norms, it is evident that children are agentic to negotiate norms collectively with their peers. Compared with the above-mentioned individuals' independent negotiations and justifications, Quincy, whose extracts appear in this section below, made a good use of the collective power and strength of her classmates to strike a balance in student-teacher tensions commonly observed

⁶⁰ Face in Chinese social rituals represents one's dignity and social standing (Ruan, 2017b).

in her class. She successfully challenged the norm of teachers overrunning class time, a common practice in many schools in China. She also fulfilled her individual needs and interests through her collective actions with her classmates, which opposed this norm.

Being left behind by her migrant father, Quincy lives with her grandparents and is a primary school boarder. Not being a member of the class committee seems to have allowed her more freedom for some of her subversive moves against teacher-imposed norms in school. Extract QU1 below demonstrates how Quincy, alongside her peer classmates, collectively negotiated a stress-free learning environment with their maths teacher during a field trip:

Me: Hi. I heard that you also went to a field trip to a cave nearby?

Quincy: Yes.

Me: What was the funniest part during the trip?

Quincy: Seeing our maths teacher riding a motor bike, we could not help but laugh at him directly. None of us had ever seen him on a bike before⁶¹!

Me: Oh, your maths teacher also went to the trip with you all?

Quincy: Yes.

Me: What happened when all of you laughed at him? Was he angry?

Quincy: He smiled graciously! He seemed to be in a good mood, just like we were.

Me: I think he is the kind of teacher who is serious when delivering lessons but kind, nice, and approachable after class. Maybe he even cracks some jokes occasionally.

Quincy: I think so. We always see him in maths lessons, and he is very serious during those times. However, outside of teaching, he is just like what you described.

Me: When do you feel safe or comfortable to laugh at or joke about your math teacher? I have noticed that the tension between teachers and students has grown in recent years in China. But I would love to hear how you and your classmates interact with your math teacher both inside and outside the classroom.

Quincy: When I was with my classmates, we all laughed at him together during the field trip. It was okay because he smiled back at us—it was funny. He was not offended at all, and we were pretty sure about that.

Me: It reminds me of some harmless naughty moments I shared with my classmates when I was in elementary school. I agree with you—it is okay to do so sometimes, especially when you are with your classmates.

Quincy: Yes. ...

(instant messages, April 2023)

In contemporary China, a teacher is typically regarded as an authoritative figure responsible for regulating and managing the entire class (Bush and Haiyan, 2000). A teacher's authority is not easily challenged by students (Bush and Haiyan, 2000). This reflects the enduring influence of traditional social norms surrounding respect for teachers. An ancient Chinese saying highlights this influence, proclaiming: once your teacher, forever a father figure⁶². Also,

⁶¹ Filed trip is a rare teaching-learning mode compared to more commonly practiced chalk and talk, or spoon-feeding educational patterns (Tietze et al., 2021).

⁶² In Mandarin *pinyin*: *yiri wei shi, zhongsheng wei fu*. In Chinese characters: 一日为师, 终身为父. It demonstrates teacher's prestigious social standing in both ancient and contemporary China (Wu, 2012).

respecting teachers and their teaching⁶³ is a widely embraced piece of Chinese ancient wisdom that has been passed down for hundreds of years. Even nowadays, parents also educate their children to listen to and obey whatever teachers say without any doubts. This was evident in Weiai's extract above labelled as WA2 in section 7.2. Otherwise, being naughty would typically result in punishment and be perceived as a sign of disrespect toward those with wisdom, namely, teachers. Hence, there is an evident power imbalance between students and teachers in China. The punishment for students' disrespectful behaviours against teachers was even stricter in ancient China than it is in contemporary China (Ma and Tsui, 2015; Wang and Wei, 2017; Xiong and Hammond, 2018).

However, in recent decades, Chinese pupils have been receiving heavy academic pressure and intense peer competitions, exacerbated by population growth (Yao et al., 2013). The pressure of the NCEE has been regarded as a life-changing opportunity for many Chinese people, especially following its revival in 1977 (Gu et al., 2017b). Some students have even committed suicide, unable to endure immense pressure imposed by both parents and teachers (Quach et al., 2015). This situation has increasingly drawn public attention and sparked debates within the society (Sun et al., 2012; Li et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2022). Some inappropriate practices by teachers, such as corporal punishment (Ding et al., 2008) and spoon-feeding teaching methods that tend to overlook the mental well-being of pupils (Xie, 2020), have all faced criticism. People have gradually come to realise that teachers' instruction in schools is not always as sacred or beyond one's reproach (Gao, 2008) as traditionally believed. Hence, absolute authority of Chinese teachers in schools has gradually lost its popularity, and reflections on some inappropriate instructional practices of some of them have also been challenged.

Such debates in contemporary China regarding student-teacher tensions have provided children, like Quincy, with opportunities to negotiate instructional norms with teachers. As social criticism has exerted pressure on the teaching community, Chinese teachers increasingly value the needs of various stakeholders involved in education, including students. The norm that Quincy

⁶³ In Mandarin *pinyin*: *zun shi zhong dao*. In Chinese characters: 尊师重道. Respecting teachers and valuing the way they teach is considered as an ancient social norm has its continuity and lasting impact (Shi, 2006).

and her classmates negotiated with their maths teacher was the traditionally serious and tense learning environment. This reflects their collective agency in challenging the established classroom dynamic between themselves and the maths teacher. Also, maths is one of the three major subjects for primary schoolers, but field trip is not. So, learning and teaching on a field trip normally provides a more relaxing learning experience for children. A field trip is also considered a cherished activity for children involving their vest interests, as it is a rare opportunity compared to the major subjects typically taught in the classroom. By laughing at their maths teacher, who is not typically seen on a motorbike, Quincy and her classmates effectively expressed their need for a more relaxed learning environment, contrasting with the usual intensity of regular math lessons. The maths teacher's gracious smile in response to them demonstrated the success of their collective negotiation.

Similar to Hazel's collective negotiation with her friend to avoid a phone confiscation, as addressed in extract HL4 above, Quincy's collective negotiation with her classmates also appears subversive to teacher-imposed norms and teacher's authority. Additionally, Hazel's negotiation was more tactful, whereas Quincy's negotiation was more direct, despite both collaborating with their peer classmates.

Comparing to Anticipation's extract (AT1), as addressed in section 5.1 of Chapter 5, where she demonstrated her collective and active participation in reporting the annoying boy, Quincy's collective normativity negotiation tends to be subversive to adults, rather than to peers. Compared with Quincy's successful experience of negotiation, it seems that the collective negotiation of Anticipation and the other girls who were also bothered by the same boy appears to frustrating with unwanted outcomes, as the boy was not really punished by their *banzhuren*.

The extract below (QU2) further illustrates Quincy's collective negotiation with her classmates to address the issue of overrunning classes practiced by their teachers. It serves as additional evidence of Quincy's efforts, alongside her peers, to challenge the norms commonly advocated by teachers:

Quincy: ...Yes. But not only during those extracurricular activities. We are very restless when teachers overrun lessons.

Me: Interesting, how?

Quincy: We just directly ask, 'when will the class be over?', and 'please tell us how long it will

take!'. We also make some noises with restless moves. I am one of those who ask teachers such questions and do the moves, ha-ha.

Me: I would not be mad if I were your teacher. I think these are cute reactions to overrun classes. I can feel that your maths teacher and other teachers dote on you all just like your parents could do, so such behaviours are permitted to some extent.

Quincy: Yes. As long as it is not too much.

Me: Indeed. It is a tacit consent between you and your teachers, isn't it?

Quincy: Yes.

Me: Do you feel safe when you do such things that could be understood as some little naughty behaviours with your classmates?

Quincy: Yes, because there are so many of us. I guess teachers do not punish the whole class⁶⁴. They only punish those individuals who take it too far. Essentially, overrunning classes is not accepted by all of us.

(instant messages, April 2023)

As mentioned earlier, societal debates surrounding student-teacher tensions in contemporary China have created space for students to negotiate instructional norms with their teachers. At the same time, teachers have become increasingly aware of these debates, particularly concerning some of their strict and unethical practices (Wong, 2008; Lo et al., 2013). It is the reason why Quincy's maths teacher, along with other teachers who overrun classes, acquiesce to seemingly disrespectful behaviours of students described in extract QU2. Evidently, the norm that Quincy and her classmates collectively negotiated with teachers is the practice of overrunning classes, a norm that children find unacceptable. By persistently asking teachers when classes will end and making restless movements, their subversive negotiation appears to be both apparent and direct.

Compared with those participants who made direct confrontations with both peers and adults to subvert constraints imposed on them and negotiate detrimental norms, as discussed in section 7.2 above, Quincy's collective negotiation with her peer classmates tends to be less confrontational. Even though both children's confrontational and less confrontational negotiations, discussed respectively in sections 7.2 and 7.4, are regarded as expressions of children's agency to subvert unacceptable norms, Quincy's negotiations remain within teachers' tolerance, as she mentioned that they are permissible as long as they are not excessive.

Furthermore, Quincy and her classmates were aware of the line or boundary

⁶⁴ An old saying arose from a widely spread concept within ancient Chinese legal and philosophical thought can help explain why Quincy has negotiated with her classmates collectively to put pressure on teachers who overrun classes: the law does not hold the masses accountable (Anon, 2019). In Chinese characters: 法不责众. In Mandarin pinyin: *fǎ bù zé zhong*. It is used as a metaphor to help analyse Quincy and her peer classmates' collective violation of teachers' instructional norms which is seen as teachers' acquiescence, as addressed in extract QU2.

between themselves and their teachers that they could not cross during their negotiations. Similarly, in section 7.2, most participants responded to certain constraints by taking actions to subvert detrimental norms during their peer interactions in school and family settings, as those around them might have already crossed the line and violated social boundaries that represent their own social norms. For instance, in extract WA2, as addressed in section 7.2 above, the discriminations made by both Weiai's former classmates and *banzhuren* were significant violations of her social boundaries. Similar situations also emerged in Hazel's self-justification of her innocence when judged unfairly by her grandpa and treated as a scapegoat by her younger sister, and in Amy's questioning of the overloaded responsibilities and expectations imposed by adults in her family (as addressed in extract AM in section 6.2 of Chapter 6), requiring her to care of and tolerate her younger siblings. All of their negotiations and justifications are part of their agency in setting social boundaries to safeguard their personal interests involved in peer relationships within adults' constraints, embedded with adults-imposed norms.

Overall, as part of their relational agency, LBC demonstrated their capacity to collectively negotiate adult-imposed norms with peers in an explicit manner. Such negotiations are subversive to adults' authoritarian practices and positions, often conflicting with the children's personal interests and violating their social boundaries.

7.5 Discussions: the interconnections between normativity negotiation and self-justification, relational agency, and relational constraints

As discussed in section 6.5 of Chapter 6, social norms emerged from the identification of multiple relational constraints that imposed by both peers and adults involved in LBC's peer relationships. Norms include gender bias, differentiated treatments by peers and adults based on LBC's age, and the accountability and responsibility mechanisms associated with birth order. Based on these identified norms, along with some new norms advocated by others and incorporated into this chapter (as discussed prior to Section 7.1), I identified multiple dimensions of children's normativity negotiations and related justifications and addressed the third research question: how LBC respond to imposed relational constraints. To summarise, children's compliance with adult authority when negotiating and justifying norms with peers, as discussed in

section 7.1, reflected their active participation within adult power structures. This demonstrates a non-subversive approach to practicing agency with peers within adult-led institutional settings. In contrast, children's direct and indirect negotiations and justifications of their own social needs and personal interests during peer interactions, as addressed respectively in sections 7.2 and 7.3, appear subversive to the authority of both powerful peers and authoritative adults. Additionally, the indirect or tactful negotiations and justifications, along with children's collective negotiations, as discussed in section 7.3 and 7.4, highlighted their efforts to mitigate the power imbalance between norm-setters (often adults) and those subjected to norms (often LBCs and their peers).

Regarding the sequence of the appearances of normativity justification and related negotiation, no evidence from my participants showed that justification usually appears before or after negotiation. Sometimes, LBC demonstrate their strengths to justify themselves first to help them further negotiate certain old norms advocated by others and establish new ones among peers, as addressed in extracts KV1, WA2, WA3 and HL5. Thus, the actions of justification and negotiation are often interconnected.

In addition, LBCs' justification and negotiation based on social norms should be considered a type of or part of their relational agency because they often demonstrate their strengths in addressing multiple issues arising from these norms, particularly those related to peer relationships within adult authority structures. At the same time, some extracts from Chapter 5 reused in this chapter highlighted the strong connection between children's relational agency in peer relationships, and their negotiations and justifications. The concept of relational constraints further bridges relational agency with children's normativity negotiations and justifications, as many extracts simultaneously appeared in both Chapters 6 and 7. Relational constraints were found to negative impact children's formation of relational agency. However, children's ability to overcome these negative effects was demonstrated through their active normativity negotiations and related justifications. This is also considered children's active participation in safeguarding their personal interests, thereby demonstrating agency when interacting with peers.

It is worth noting that relational constraints did not always manifest as norms, nor did children's normativity negotiation and justification always demonstrate

their subversion of these identified norms. Therefore, relational constraints are not simply equivalent to norms.

Additionally, there is room for children to negotiate adult-advocated norms with peers, which are recognised as beneficial to both children themselves and their peers as a collective.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

8.1 Summary of key findings

Based on the rationale of de-stereotyping and de-stigmatising Chinese LBC, their abilities or strengths are prioritised in this research over their vulnerabilities, which are more commonly seen in prior relevant studies. Despite the predominant psychological and educational approaches utilised in the literature on LBC in China, children's voices and perspectives were seldomly taken into consideration. After the launch of LBC-related policies in China, Chinese LBC's interpersonal relationships have been reshaped, indicating the significance of their relationships with peers in both family and school settings after parental migration. Meanwhile, in the research area of children's peer relationship, children's agency remains under-researched. Although adults' intervention in children's peer relationships was evident in prior relevant studies, interpreting adults' intervention or impact from children's perspectives seems uncommon. Thus, aiming to shift the prevailing research paradigms in studies on LBC in China and to address existing knowledge gaps, this research incorporated relevant theories and concepts in the sociology of childhood and sociology and formulated a conceptual framework involving three major elements: relational agency, relational constraints and normativity negotiation and/or justification to answer three research questions correspondingly: 1) How do Chinese LBC enact relational agency in peer interactions? 2) What are the relational constraints imposed by others, including peers and adults, in the context of Chinese LBC's agency in peer relationships? 3) How do Chinese LBC react to those constraints in their peer interactions?

This research was conducted entirely using qualitative methods, which are generally considered more effective than quantitative ones in listening to children's voices (Scott, 2008; Urbina-Garcia, 2019). Moving from conceptual meanings to operational definitions of agency, constraints and normativity negotiation and/or justification when addressing the 3 research questions, the interview prompts were generated and utilised in online and in-person interviews and instant text messages on WeChat with sixteen LBC participants from March 2022 to October 2023. This part of data formulated as the dominant data sets. The results of WeChat Moments observation were utilised as subordinate data. Five steps were carried out to process the collected data

when incorporating methods of discourse analysis, narrative analysis and thematic analysis. During the whole research process, the incompatibility of the university-based procedural ethics was also identified, based on my fieldwork experience. Understanding the indigenous ethics and knowledge in China involving power disparities and power plays between Chinese children and adults is crucial in research involving children from the Majority World.

Meanwhile, removing monetary incentives and addressing digital platform ethics were also reflected and addressed in Chapter 4, formulating as part of the findings in this research. I positioned myself as a cultural insider to the Chinese context, so I contextualised not just ethics but also children's agency. In comparison, I might be an outsider to the original theories and concepts I used in my conceptualisations, as addressed in Chapter 3. This insider-outsider positionality empowers this research to try to mitigate the tension between universal concepts of childhood and children's localised experiences around the world, when addressing similar debates in children's geographies.

Based on the empirical findings that illustrated respectively in Chapter 5, 6, and 7, this research has expanded the prior understanding of children's agency and explored the authenticity of children's relational agency in peer relationships when exemplifying Chinese LBC. The three empirical chapters have successfully answered the three research questions correspondingly. Diagram 4.3 in Chapter 4 mapped the linkages between assumptions made in literature review, the three research questions, related theories/concepts, and findings, demonstrating the logic thread of the main body of this research. With that diagram in hand, how the flow of ideas was structured in connecting the three empirical chapters was also clarified.

In answering the first research question, 4 different types of children's relational agency in peer relationship in both family and school were demonstrated in Chapter 5. The four different types include: 1) children's active participation in confrontational peer interactions; 2) their competence to shift perspective and differentiate peer groups; 3) their capacity to use, create and order criteria made for friend selection, rejection and peer differentiation; and 4) their silent and distant actions involving their interpretations of peers' ingenuity and untrustworthy behaviours. The interconnections between different types of relational agency addressed in section 5.5 suggested that some participants

possess more than one form of relational agency. Within the identification of their multi-faceted relational agency in peer relationships, relational constraints and their negotiation of social norms also appeared, showing the relevance between the 3 concepts as conceptualised in Chapter 3.

When shifting from identifying structural constraints imposed on child agency, this research emphasised relational constraints as a relational approach was incorporated to scrutinise child agency. Thus, the second research question associated with relational constraints, rather than structural constraints. When drawing on seven new extracts and three prior extracts from section 5.1 in Chapter 5, different types of relational constraints were identified in Chapter 6 to answer the second research question on what are the relational constraints that imposed by others. Birth order bias, gender bias, adults' expectation and its relevant responsibility and accountability mechanism for older or oldest child(ren) in family, and the non-verbal constraint embedding adults' authoritarian position in student management system in school were all seen as the relational constraints imposed which affected LBC's formation of relational agency in peer relationship. These constraints appeared to be social norms practiced in Chinese society. By questioning further about LBC's reactions to the norms which were seen as relational constraints imposed by others when socialising with peers, the third research question came into place.

Chapter 7 was dedicated to answer the third research question on LBC's reactions to those imposed constraints when socialising with peers. Likewise, LBC also showed different types of competence to negotiate social norms and justify their social behaviours when interacting with peers in family and school settings. LBC were found to be competent to negotiate social norms validated by adults and upheld by LBC themselves with their peers in school and family. LBC's negotiation and justification in peer relationships also appeared to be directly subversive to adult-imposed and peer-imposed constraints/norms, which is the most common scenario throughout this research. LBC can also take a detour around certain rules set by both peers and adults that were also seen as social norms when socialising with peers. LBC were also found to be competent enough to negotiate norms that involved teacher's authoritarian position and justify their needs collectively with peers in a voiced or subversive way. The above different types of their normativity negotiation and justification

were recognised as LBC's reactions to the norms identified as relational constraints, formulating as part of their relational agency in peer relationships.

In all, different types of LBC's relational agency, relational constraints and competence to negotiate social normativity and justify social behaviours were identified respectively in Chapter 5, 6, and 7 in answering three corresponding research questions. Compared to the research paradigm involving more of their vulnerabilities addressed in the literature review chapter (Chapter 2), Chinese LBC were proved to be competent enough to deal with their peer relationships in both family and school settings. When scrutinising their relational agency in peer relationship, their competence to navigate both peers' and adults' constraints imposed on them was also evident. Not just adults, peers appeared to be influential in shaping children's relational agency. They were also active social agents in navigating the imposed constraints perceived as Chinese social norms in peer relationships. They also demonstrated their competence to negotiate these social norms and justifying related social behaviors with peers, which was considered as a new form of relational agency. With the key findings generated from the three empirical chapters, it is evident that LBC's voices and perspectives can better be empowered when incorporating the conceptual framework involving the three elements as addressed in Chapter 3 on theoretical framework. The conceptual framework effectively tied the three empirical chapters together, ensuring logical consistency across them.

Drawing on the key findings mentioned in the above, the following sections will emphasise theoretical contributions, research results dissemination, research limitations and future research directions.

8.2 Research contributions

This research contributes to multiple research areas including the following: 1) the realms that children's agency can be researched; 2) children's agency in the sociology of childhood; 3) children's geographies; 4) the research area of ethics in childhood studies; 5) the research areas of LBC studies and 6) peer relationships. The following paragraphs will detail the contributions of this research to the above-mentioned areas.

This research expanded the researchable areas of children's relational agency by shifting the focus from child-adult relationship to children's peer relationship.

In previous research related to child agency, the child-adult relationship and the power imbalance between children and adults have been the main focus in relevant debates, leaving children's agency in peer relationships under researched. By emphasising peers' impact on children and seeing children's agency from a relational perspective, this research has contributed to the identification of areas that children's agency can be explored. Meanwhile, children's peers are as influential as adults in shaping children's relational agency. Both children's peers and peer relationship deserve recognition and inclusion in discussions surrounding child agency. In addition, adults and their authoritarian positions are also influential to children's relational agency in peer relationships when drawing on key findings in Chapter 6 and 7 as shown above. In fact, this research also hinted that peers may also be one of the influential groups who can shape child agency related to child-adult relationships, which requires further in-depth research in the future. Expanding the researchable realms of child agency depends on carefully considering the triadic relationship between children themselves, children's peers, and adults. The benefits of expanding the realms lie in enriching the construction of child agency and uncovering the authenticity of child agency.

This research contributes to the field of children's agency in the sociology of childhood. By confirming prior conceptual constructions on children's agency, relational agency, active participation and silent agency, this research has extended the prior understanding of children's agency by taking a relational approach when emphasising children's peer relationship. Other than showing the originality of this research by arguing around LBC's social competence to shift perspectives and differentiate peer groups, and their ability to use, create and order certain criteria generated by the children themselves, the meaning of active participation, silent agency and relational agency have also been expanded. This research identified multiple relational constraints which were seen as social norms imposed by both children's peers and adults which has further contributed to a new understanding of children's relational agency. This new understanding views children's agency as their ability to negotiate social norms and justify their social behaviours in peer relationships involving adults' imposition. Meanwhile, in the discussions of different types of relational agency, this research included an in-depth analysis of agency-related characteristics in

Chapter 5 and 7. Different types of relational constraints that identified in Chapter 6 which shaped children's relational agency also demonstrated the authenticity of children's relational agency.

This research contributes to the field of children's geographies. Debates in children's geographies often engage with the tension between universal concepts of childhood and diverse, indigenous experiences of children around the world (Holloway and Valentine, 2000a; Holloway, 2014). How childhoods are constructed in different cultural, social, and economic contexts, and whether universal frameworks can adequately address these variations are often questioned (Punch, 2003; Mayall, 2013). This research bridges the gap between understanding universal concepts of childhood and the indigenous contexts of varying childhood by incorporating concepts from the Minority World when researching LBC's experience in the Majority World. When simultaneously taking universal concepts and cultural diversity into account, the research results have shown the success of this model to be effective and applicable. In addition, the role of social mobility in children's lives is another key debate in children's geographies. Relevant research explores how children's experiences of mobility differ from those of adults and how migration impacts their social relationships, identities, and sense of belonging (Katz, 2004; Baraldi, 2023). This is connected to broader conversations about globalisation and transnationalism within the field of children's geographies. This research also contributes to children's experiences of social mobility and the impact of migration on children's interpersonal relationships, but with a focus on those who are left behind by their migrant parents rather than those who migrate. The left behind or left at home children also deserve a recognition and inclusion in debates surrounding children's geographies.

This research also contributes to methodology in childhood studies by incorporating Chinese context in ethical considerations of this research based on the procedural ethics from the University. Ethical considerations in research involving children and youth typically receive more attention and concern compared to research involving adults as participants. At the same time, ethical challenges emerged in this research are not only related with children and youth themselves but also associated with the particularity of the context of this research that situated in Chinese society. In section 4.7.2 and 4.7.3 in Chapter

4 on methodology, ethics-related discussions addressing the incompatibility of the procedural ethics, child-adult power disparities and power plays, removal of monetary incentives and the ethics in using WeChat and smartphones in conducting research with Chinese children and youth were all considered as the contributions in tackling ethical challenges in childhood studies. Since the power disparity between children and adults is central to debates on child agency, this aspect of ethical considerations is prioritised over the others mentioned above, demonstrating methodological alignment with the incorporated conceptual framework. The below paragraph is my justification of this alignment based on relevant discussion in Chapter 4 on methodology.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, my attempt to navigate the power plays in this research was embedded in the analysis part in the 3 empirical chapters. I successfully addressed power imbalance between children and adults in both family and school contexts when scrutinising child agency in peer relationships, also that between children and their peers by incorporating multiple context-based cross-cultural explanations. For instance, the explanation on class committee in Chapter 6 regarding the hierarchical relationship between students and their *banzhuren*, and these girls' frustration of reporting some annoying boys when their *banzhuren*'s authority seemed to be powerless in Chapter 5. Meanwhile, although seen as social norms, relational constraints also demonstrated adults' power over children when they socialise with peers in family and school. When discussing children's normativity negotiation and justification, children also presented their power to break through these constraints and establish new power plays or social order in peer relationships when justifying social normativity. Thus, when expanding the meanings of children's agency in Chapter 5, unearthing the reasons that constrain their agency in Chapter 6, and constructing their social competence to negotiate social normativity and justify themselves in Chapter 7, the ethical considerations involving power disparities and power plays were properly addressed in alignment with the conceptual framework.

Lastly, this research contributes to the research areas of LBC studies and peer relationship. As mentioned in the literature review in Chapter 2, the diverse focuses found in both the literature on LBC in China and in the international literature reflect the multiple theoretical frameworks previously employed by

scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds. As an agency model is rarely seen in prior LBC studies, it provides LBC-related fields with sociological approaches from children's perspectives involving children's voices. It also provides sociological approaches in LBC studies with children's voices in peer relationships. Furthermore, it also expands educational approaches in LBC studies by scrutinising students' agency rather than teachers' in student-teacher relationship: another type of child-adult relationship which is imperative in debates surrounding child agency. Meanwhile, an agency model is also rarely seen in the research area of peer relationships. It provides studies in peer relationships with a relational approach when addressing constraints. In LBC's peer relationship, adults remain the dominant figures in shaping their agency in peer relationships. Discussions on LBC's negotiation and justification of social norms imposed by adults also contribute to studies on children's peer relationships, where adult imposition is rarely considered. In peer-imposed constraints or norms, adults' imposition is also evident.

8.3 Research results dissemination

As one of the research rationale, de-stereotyping and de-stigmatising LBC should also be considered in real world practices. In this research, empowering children is seen as respecting children and putting trust in their strength rather than emphasising their vulnerabilities without providing any specific and effective solutions in real world. Also, identifying their daily struggles when providing solutions does not contradict with the notion of empowering LBC in this research, as being active social agents is not equivalent to a life free of struggles. Rather, LBC's daily struggles identified in this research indicate their strong awareness of child-adult and child-child power dynamics, showing exactly their relational agency. When offering a perspective of empowering them for LBC studies, this research also tries to provide adults working or living closely with Chinese LBC with a corresponding perspective incorporating not just empathy but also respect. Based on the identification of different groups of adults including parents, surrogate parents, school practitioners, social workers and policy makers and so on, the following paragraphs will disclose several possible ways of disseminating the research results through adults and their collaborations across different domains.

What migrant parents can benefit from this research is also easy to identify.

Through this research, they will know more details about their children's lives after their migration. Particularly, LBC's life in the current childrearing arrangements made by them. In doing so, migrant parents can help tackle issues and difficulties that their children encounter after their migration. Although being busy and living apart from their children, some of the migrant parents were found to be very responsible for their children's life and study during the process of obtaining parental consent for this research. For example, although the research was endorsed by school principals beforehand, some parents still acted as vigilant gatekeepers when I used the contact information provided by schools to reach them and gain consent from them before approaching their children. For these parents who are temporarily separated from their children, yet still filled with deep concern and care for their children, the identified different types of relational constraints in Chapter 6 can help enhance their understanding of LBC when children have their own concerns to not tell their parents about their suffering in daily life. Especially when the parenting involvement of surrogate parents requires intervention, migrant parents need to make accurate judgments to take timely mitigating actions. Some of the parents might be considered prioritising money issues and their daily hustles over children's daily issues with a lack of concern and care for their children, but this research might have the chance to shift their perspectives as children's struggles in daily life which might be similar to theirs. Not just the collaboration with surrogate parents in family, migrant parents should also work closely with school practitioners (normally with *banzhuren*) to identify and deal with children's suffering in school when they socialise with their peers and be aware of related emotional changes of children. At the same time, parents can get in touch with other children's parents to tackle issues related to school practitioners, such as discriminations made and instigated by some *banzhuren* as addressed in Weiai's extracts in Chapter 7. The key to these above-mentioned aspects is listening to LBC's voices and their silences with empathy and respect, as part of LBC's struggles are closely tied to the absence of their migrant parents and the impact of migration decisions made by them (Wen et al., 2021).

Similarly, what surrogate parents can benefit from this research is easy to tell. In Chapter 6, some of the commonly seen detrimental norms in family were

identified. In Chapter 7, LBC's negotiation and justification in relation to these norms in family were also evident. Based on these relevant findings and discussions addressing family context in Chapter 6 and 7, surrogate parents can enhance their understanding of LBC's social life with peers and with them directly in family and LBC's relevant struggles. The triadic relationship between surrogate parents, LBC and their peers at home should be taken into consideration by surrogate parents. Meanwhile, internal collaboration between surrogate parents and migrant parents can benefit LBC and their formation of relational agency in family. Starting with healthy communications between these adult family members, their collaboration can be effective to collectively solve the problems hindering LBC's practice of agency in family. For example, when unpacking the norm of children's birth order in Chapter 6, surrogate parents need to situate themselves in older children's struggles related to their birth order and corresponding responsibilities and generate coping strategies with migrant parents. It applies to tackling other detrimental norms in family that identified by children themselves. Surrogate parents should also be aware of children's personal boundaries related to the social norms identified in Chapter 6 and 7 and provide help when migrant parents are absent. Other than internal collaboration in family, surrogate parents may consider engaging themselves more often in home-school cooperation through parent-teacher associations on behalf of migrant parents when they are away. Meanwhile, some surrogate parents are ethnic minorities who cannot speak Chinese Mandarin, like Chloe's maternal grandma as addressed in Chapter 6. At the same time, some LBC who are recognised as ethnic minorities also attend schools for Han people, just like Chloe. Thus, surrogate parents should navigate communicative difficulties in home-school cooperation and try to remove language barriers through their bilingual children who are agentic enough to express their social encounters in school. School practitioners are also responsible for navigating such communicative difficulties. Below are other aspects regarding what school practitioners can benefit from this research and what they need to do to facilitate children's agency when family is considered as being insufficiently equipped.

There are several actions educators can take to better support LBC and migrant children, particularly in promoting their agency and fostering a more inclusive

educational environment. First, it is crucial to challenge and discard the stereotypes and discrimination often associated with LBC and migrant children. As seen in Weiai's extracts regarding her social experience in school addressed in Chapter 7, the biased treatment she experienced from her homeroom teacher (*banzhuren*) not only impacted her, but also influenced her peers, leading to further isolation and undermining her sense of identity as a migrant child and relational agency. It took Weiai a long time to rebuild her self-worth and agency. Educators need to prevent such discriminatory practices and cultivate a more understanding and supportive atmosphere for these children. Second, reforms in the Chinese education system should be implemented to provide more opportunities for Chinese LBC and migrant children to express and develop their agency. One example, highlighted in my research, is the rotation of class committees discussed in Chapter 5. This system encourages greater peer engagement and allows children to take on different roles, fostering a sense of responsibility and agency among students, including LBC. By providing these structured opportunities, educators can help these children positively influence their peer groups and overcome difficulties encountered during their work. Finally, collaboration between educators and both surrogate and migrant parents is essential. Often, when LBC's agency is constrained within the home due to parental migration or other related factors, schools should create environments to facilitate children's agency and offer alternative spaces for their socialisation. This can provide LBC with the support they need to build their social skills and confidence, compensating for the constraints they might face at home. By working together, educators and families can create a more nurturing environment that enhances the overall development and well-being of LBC and migrant children. These steps, rooted in my research findings, are essential for fostering a more inclusive and supportive educational environment that empowers children to thrive.

There are several important actions that social workers, policymakers, NGOs, and volunteers can take to better support LBC and foster a more ethical and inclusive approach to LBC's social well-being. For social workers, collaboration with migrant parents, surrogate parents, and educators is essential. Given the limited time social workers often have to communicate with migrant parents, it is crucial to prioritise engagement with surrogate parents, who are more directly

involved in the children's daily lives. This cooperation can provide much-needed support for LBC, especially in addressing their emotional and social needs, which are evidenced through the key findings. Additionally, social workers are not only responsible for supporting LBC but also for addressing the needs of surrogate parents, who play a critical role in these children's lives. Family conflicts may be a primary concern that social workers need to address, as resolving these issues can create a more stable social environment for the child left behind. Social workers can help build stronger relationships between families, the society and the state to better support LBC. For policymakers, the data collected from frontline social workers' experiences can provide valuable insights into the real social needs of LBC. This can inform the creation of more detailed, appropriate, and ethical policies that directly address the challenges faced by LBC and even their families. Policy should not only focus on immediate financial aid but also on long-term solutions that prioritise LBC's holistic development and facilitate more inclusive social environment for their growth. For NGOs, the support provided should extend beyond financial aid to include programs that enhance LBC's personal growth, such as the Blue Letter Project, which promotes letter exchanges between LBC and university students as volunteers.

8.4 Research limitations and future research directions

Although this research has expanded the understanding of agency, there remain other types of relational agency that have not been explored. It is important to recognise that each form of agency holds unique value and merits further examination. Additionally, each type of agency encompasses different characteristics. For example, in the discussion on active participation in Chapter 5, LBC have demonstrated a nuanced balance between independence, interdependence, and dependence. These traits highlight the complexity of how LBC navigate their social environments when interacting with peers. The relational constraints and power dynamics that LBC experienced could manifest in diverse forms of agency, suggesting that further exploration may reveal additional layers of how LBC exercise influence and establish their roles within peer groups. By addressing these gaps, future research could also deepen the understanding of LBC's relational agency in other social relationships,

contributing to more comprehensive insights into how they negotiate relationships, autonomy in relationships, and social integration.

From a methodological perspective, this research primarily relied on data collected through WeChat due to the aftermath of COVID-19, which served as the main source of information. This innovative approach offered significant advantages for obtaining in-depth data and facilitated detailed analysis of participants' experiences. However, compared to traditional in-person interviews, the process was more time-consuming and less efficient, as the remote nature of WeChat often led to extended interactions and delays in responses. Additionally, although this study uses WeChat Moments observations as a substitute, the absence of in-person observations of the participants' peer interactions in real-life settings is another limitation. Such observations could have provided more valuable insights into the nuances of how LBC interact and negotiate social norms with their peers. Moreover, in-person interviews were under time constraints, limiting the depth and breadth of information that could be gathered. Future research could aim to integrate these two methods more effectively, balancing the use of digital platforms like WeChat with in-person, real-time observations and interviews. By adopting a more integrated and flexible methodology, future studies could yield richer and more comprehensive insights into the complex ways LBC navigate their social worlds.

From the perspective of the research context, this research is limited to the Chinese context and specifically focuses on Chinese LBC, which may not be fully applicable to all children. However, since the phenomenon of LBC is a global issue, this research has a certain level of applicability in other contexts. In Chapter 2 on literature review, the study discussed key research directions related to LBC in countries beyond China, highlighting that children's perspectives and voices remain relatively underexplored in the international literature as well. Additionally, when examining how LBC in these contexts exercise agency following parental migration, it is important to consider the local socioeconomic conditions that shape their experiences. Although the scope of this research is confined to China, this focus helps avoid potential misinterpretations that could arise from contextual and cultural differences. By concentrating solely on the Chinese context, the study ensures a clearer understanding of the specific dynamics influencing LBC's agency within this

particular setting, making it a more coherent and contextually grounded contribution to the wider body of LBC research. Future research could incorporate comparative analysis to explore similarities and differences among LBC in various regions, examining how different cultural, socio-economic, and policy contexts influence their agency and socialisation.

Regarding empowering children in identifying different peer groups, not allowing children to identify their own peer groups may led to a lack of detailed exploration and discussion of a specific peer relationship. In this research, peers were broadly categorised as individuals within the same adult-led institutional settings. This generalisation served the focus on agency, it inadvertently overlooked the empowerment of children in classifying their own peer groups. I hope future research can address this gap, exploring more about the connections between different types of peer relationships, such as how friendship might influence sisterhood or other kinship relationships. For instance, in section 5.1 of Chapter 5, Hayden's extracts demonstrated that friendship in school did impact sisterhood. Although focusing on a specific peer relationship helps sharpen the research focus, it may also miss new insights in relational agency regarding how agency transfers between different types of relationships and how agency is learnt and practiced by LBC when socialising with different peers based on the holistic perspective employed in this research and addressed in Chapter 4 on methodology. Future studies could delve deeper into these intersections, enriching our understanding of children's social dynamics.

Regarding the positionality of being a cultural insider and a theoretical outsider as addressed in Chapter 4 on methodology, there are several important reflections regarding research limitations. Firstly, this research may not have fully achieved the goal of decolonising childhood studies (Rabello de Castro, 2020; Abebe et al., 2022), as it still relies on theories and concepts from the Minority World. Secondly, as an outsider to these theories and concepts, my understanding of them may not be as nuanced as that of a local researcher deeply embedded in the context. Additionally, potential readers who are also cultural outsiders may face challenges in understanding the specific context of the research and may not fully agree with this hybrid model employed in researching children's agency. This underscores the complexity of balancing

cultural insights with theoretical frameworks in cross-cultural research and highlights the need for more inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches in future studies on children's agency. At the same time, utilising indigenous theories/concepts and ethics is a feasible approach to further decolonise childhood studies in the Majority World.

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Appendix 1: Information sheet for children (participants)

Invitation

Hi! My name is Shichong Li. I am a PhD student at the University of Leeds (School of Education) in the UK. My research is about how you interact with your peers in China, how you influence each other and what counts for you when interacting.

You are being invited to take part in this research. Before you decide it is important for you to understand how the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and ask for others' opinions if you wish. Or you are welcome to ask me if there is anything that is not clear, or if you would like to know more regarding this research.

Why have I been chosen?

If you are 12, 14 or 15 years old with Chinese nationality and do not live with your parents for more than three months in a year, then you are eligible to take part in this research. Do you have any worries you want to talk about? I want to hear your voices about your feelings/thoughts and experience in your interaction with peers (peers could be your siblings, cousins, classmates, or friends, those you often meet up and spend time with.). Also, you are welcome to talk about your expectations/suggestions on this study.

This study plans to recruit and maintain around 15 participants.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time. You do not have to give a reason.

What do I have to do?/ What will happen to me if I take part?

You might be invited to talk to me privately in a one-to-one way. You can also drop me a line on any app you use to liaise with your peers if you wish. Due to the restrictions on COVID-19 in the UK, the one-to-one interview will be conducted online via WeChat, and you will be required to access a stable internet connection in order to make sure that quality of video meeting will not be affected. The exact time and date of interview will be agreed with you in advance. However, you can also send me texts anytime you want. Each interview will take around 30-60 minutes. You might also be invited for 3-4 interviews.

All your personal information will be kept confidentially. Please be aware that the interviews and online messages will be recorded and kept in a safe place. Your anonymized quotes may be used in publications about the research. No other use will be made of without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed to access to the original recordings.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

You may recall unpleasant memories during the study. If you feel uncomfortable, we can take a break. You can also stop at any time you want and withdraw your personal data. All the arrangements will protect both you and me from getting into trouble.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Regarding the issues I mentioned above, I can provide you information you need as reimbursement. For example, you could ask me where you could seek help.

Use, dissemination and storage of research data

Research data will be collected, stored and anonymised by me. I will also be responsible for translation. All data will be stored on the security approved University of Leeds One Drive and on password protected documents. With the exception of verbal consent, recordings will be erased after data have been fully analyzed. The research data will be for research purpose only, such as publications and conferences. The use of data will be kept anonymous.

What will happen to my personal information?

Your responses will be anonymized. Your names and any identifiable details also will be anonymised, and a unique participation code that is only known between you and me will be generated. It is significant to protect your privacy. But, please notice that data will be used and shared. This study has been approved by the University of Leeds (Faculty of Social Science, School of Education) Research Ethics Committee (Reference no. ____; Date of Approval: ____).

You have the right to request for checking the approved ethical form, or ask someone to help with your checking.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

All the contact information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will stored separately from the research data. I will anonymise the research data so that you will not be identified in any reports or publications. The results of the research are likely to be published after around two years. Once published, I will inform participants. If you would like to take a look, I will give you a copy of the published results. If you agree, the data collected during the course of the project might be used for additional or subsequent research, and all data will be still kept anonymous.

The confidentiality will be maintained all the time but there are exceptions breaking confidentiality. For example, if you discloses an intention to harm themselves or others, I will report to her supervisors to discuss what actions should be taken to ensure safety.

Please be aware that full anonymity cannot be guaranteed as confidentiality could be broken. However, I will ask everyone to keep the details of the research and discuss confidential at the start of the research.

What type of information will be sought from me and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research project's objectives?

Your demographic information will be collected, including gender, age, ethnicity and the year of school. The demographic information contributes to further analysis. You will also be asked to talk about your opinions and experience in terms of peer interactions.

Contact for further information

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the research team.

Me:

Shichong Li (Email: edsl@leeds.ac.uk)

Contact me in Chinese or English

The supervisors:

Dr. Gill Main

+44(0)113 343 0237

G.Main@leeds.ac.uk

Dr. Anne Luke

+44(0)113 343 3791

A.C.Luke@leeds.ac.uk

Contact them in English only

What will happen next?

Thank you for your time to reading this information sheet. If you have some interests or would like to take part in this research, please contact Shichong Li (Email: edsl@leeds.ac.uk ; WeChat: lsc_alison) to ask questions or attend. Your participation is greatly appreciated!

Research title	Document type	Version #	Date
Children's agency in peer relations: taking Chinese left-behind children as an example	Information sheet	1	01/07/2021

Appendix 2: Information sheet for parents (guardians)

Invitation

Hi! My name is Shichong Li. I am a PhD student at the University of Leeds (School of Education) in the UK. My research is about how LBC interact with peers in China, how they influence each other and what counts for them when interacting.

Your children/students are being invited to take part in this research. Before you decide it is important for you to understand how the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and ask for others' opinions if you wish. Or you are welcome to ask me if there is anything that is not clear, or if you would like to know more regarding this research.

Why have your children/students been chosen?

If your children/students are 12, 14 or 15 years old (13 years old are also welcome) with Chinese nationality and do not live with their parents for more than three months in a year, then they are eligible to take part in this research. I want to hear their voices about their feelings/thoughts and experience in interaction with peers. Also, you and your children/students are welcome to talk about your expectations/suggestions on this study.

This study plans to recruit and maintain around 15 participants (children/students).

Do they have to take part?

If you are parents/guardians, it is up to you to whether have your children/child attending my research or not. If you decide to have them to take part, you will be given a consent form and sign. You and your children/ child can withdraw at any time and do not have to give a reason.

If you are teachers or school administrators, I sincerely need your support and permission to contact parents/guardians and your students. However, you still have the right to decline.

What do they have to do?/ What will happen to them if they take part?

They might be invited to talk to me privately in a one-to-one way. They can also drop me a line on any app they use to liaise with their peers if they wish. Due to the restrictions on COVID-19 in the UK, the one-to-one interview will be conducted online via WeChat, and they will be required to access a stable internet connection in order to make sure that quality of video meeting will not be affected. The exact time and date of interview will be agreed with them in advance. However, they can also send me texts anytime they want. Each interview will take around 30-60 minutes. They might also be invited for 3-4 interviews.

All their personal information will be kept confidentially. Please be aware that the interviews and online messages will be recorded and kept in a safe place. Their anonymized quotes may be used in publications about the research. No other use will be made of without your permission and informed consent, and no one outside the project will be allowed to access to the original recordings.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

They may recall unpleasant memories during the study. If they feel uncomfortable, we will take a break. They can also stop at any time they want and withdraw their personal data. All the arrangements will protect us (participants and I) from getting into trouble.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Regarding the issues I mentioned above, I can provide them information they need as reimbursement. For example, they could ask me where they could seek help.

Use, dissemination and storage of research data

Research data will be collected, stored and anonymised by me. I will also be responsible for translation. All data will be stored on the security approved University of Leeds One Drive and on password protected documents. With the exception of verbal consent, recordings will be erased after data have been fully analyzed. The research data will be for research purpose only, such as publications and conferences. The use of data will be kept anonymous.

What will happen to their personal information?

Their personal information will keep strictly confidential. Their names and any identifiable details will be anonymised, and a unique participation code that is only known between participants and I will be generated. It is significant to protect their privacy. This study has been approved by the University of Leeds (Faculty of Social Science, School of Education) Research Ethics Committee (Reference no. ____; Date of Approval: ____).

You have the right to request for checking the approved ethical form, or ask someone to help with your checking.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

All the contact information that I collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will stored separately from the research data. I will anonymise the research data so that you will not be identified in any reports or publications. The results of the research are likely to be published after around two years. Once published, I will inform participants. If you would like to take a look, I will give you a copy of the published results. If you agree, the data collected during the course of the project might be used for additional or subsequent research, and all data will be still kept anonymous.

The confidentiality will be maintained all the time but there are exceptions breaking confidentiality. For example, if they discloses an intention to harm themselves or others, I will report to her supervisors to discuss what actions should be taken to ensure safety.

Please be aware that full anonymity cannot be guaranteed as confidentiality could be broken. However, I will ask everyone to keep the details of the research and discuss confidential at the start of the research.

What type of information will be sought from me and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research project's objectives?

Their demographic information will be collected, including gender, age, ethnicity and the year of school. The demographic information contributes to further analysis. They will also be asked to talk about their opinions and experience in terms of peer interactions.

Contact for further information

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the research team.

Me:

Shichong Li (Email: edsl@leeds.ac.uk),

Contact me in Chinese or English

The supervisors:

Dr. Gill Main
 +44(0)113 343 0237
G.Main@leeds.ac.uk

Dr. Anne Luke
 +44(0)113 343 3791
A.C.Luke@leeds.ac.uk

Contact them in English only

What will happen next?

Thank you for your time to reading this information sheet. If you have some interests or would like to take part in this research, please contact Shichong Li (Email: edsl@leeds.ac.uk ; WeChat: lsc_alison) to ask questions or attend. Your participation is greatly appreciated!

Research title	Document type	Version #	Date
Children's agency in peer relations: taking Chinese left-behind children as an example	Information sheet	1	01/07/2021

Appendix 3: Letter of permission for teachers and school administrators

01 Jul 2021
Shichong Li
School of Education
University of Leeds
Leeds
LS2 9JT
United Kingdom

Dear teachers and school administrators,

I am contacting you because your student/students would like to participate in my research, and I need to get your permission to contact students' parents/guardians before the start of the research.

My research title is: Children's agency in peer relations: taking Chinese left-behind children as an example. The research is exploring peer interactions among Chinese left-behind children, and mainly focusing on how they interact, what counts for them during their interactions. The reasons I want to know more about peer relations of Chinese LBC are: bringing more attention on their daily life, and hoping to help relevant researchers or organizations to work together and take relevant actions to develop LBC's wellbeing under boarding system.

Migration is the reason that directly caused the phenomenon of LBC. Prevailing studies regarding LBC are often relevant to family socioeconomic circumstances. These are mainly around the impact or effect of parental migration. However, less attention has been focused on LBC's own perspective and their daily life given boarding system has been launched in 2016. Under boarding system, thus, spending more time with peers and teachers in school becomes the major interpersonal component of LBC's daily life.

Using of perspectives of children's agency and peer relations in this research will benefit Chinese LBC relevant studies in enriching research paradigm. This research also provides people a microcosm of Chinese LBC rather than allowing them to be known passively from most of the relevant studies.

I am looking for parents/guardians who want their child to take part in this research study. I am also looking for students who are:

- 12, 14 or 15 years old
- Chinese
- Have the experience of being left-behind

In this research, I would:

- Invite student to attend one-to-one online interviews, and each of them is taking around 30-60 minute
- Invite student to chat with me online
- Protect their privacy, and their name and personal data will be kept confidential

Please look at more details in Participant Information Sheet.

Taking part in this research is always optional. If you also decided to help me contacting with parents and students, please provide me verbal consent.

If you would like to obtain more research information or make enquiry, please contact the researcher:

Shichong Li
Email: edsl@leeds.ac.uk
WeChat: lsc_alison
QQ: 332835338

Thank you for your time
Sincerely,
Shichong Li

Appendix 4: Informed consent for parents (guardians)

01 Jul 2021
Shichong Li
School of Education
University of Leeds
Leeds
LS2 9JT
United Kingdom

Dear parents/guardians,

I am contacting you because your child/children would like to participate in this research, and we need to get your permission before the start of the research.

The research is exploring peer interactions among Chinese left-behind children, and mainly focusing on how they interact, what counts for them during their interactions. The reasons I want to know more about peer relations of Chinese LBC are: bringing more attention on their daily life, and hoping to help relevant researchers or organizations to work together and take relevant actions to develop LBC's wellbeing under boarding system.

I am looking for parents/guardians who want their child to take part in this research study. I am also looking for children who are:

- 12, 14 or 15 years old (if your child/children is/are 13 years old, you and your child/children are welcome to enquire)
- Chinese
- have the experience of being left-behind

In this research, I would:

- invite your child to attend one-to-one online interview taking around 30-60 minute
- invite your child to chat with me online in a form of keeping a diary or log in order to make some reflection between interviews
- protect their privacy, and their name and personal data will be kept confidential

Your children can withdraw from my research any time they want without giving a reason during my data collection. However, your children could not withdraw from my research after I finish my data collection (July 31st, 2022). You could request your children's data to be withdrawn within one month (August 31st, 2022) after I finish my data collection. Both of the dates that I mentioned above are judged by the feasibility of my research: I plan to collect my data for about 6 months (from February 1st to July 31st, 2022). If your children withdraw their data at any time they want during my whole research, I might not be able to finish my research promptly. I will also delete data if they want to withdraw. If a request is made after the dates that I mentioned, data could not be withdrawn. Please understand that.

Please look at more details in Participant Information Sheet.

Taking part in this research is always optional. If you decided to have your child taking part in the study, please sign this form.

If you would like to obtain more research information or ask questions, please contact the researcher:

Shichong Li
Email: edsl@leeds.ac.uk
WeChat: lsc_alison

QQ: 332835338

Thank you for your time
Sincerely,
Shichong Li

**Consent to take part in Children's agency in peer relations:
taking Chinese left-behind children as an example**

Add your
initials
next to
the
statement
if you
agree

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet/ letter dated (01/07/2021) explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.	
I understand that members of the research team may have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential.	
I understand that the data collected from me may be stored and used in relevant future research in an anonymised form or I understand that the data I provide may be archived at the Leeds University One Drive.	
I understand that relevant sections of the data collected during the study, may be looked at by individuals from the University of Leeds or from regulatory authorities where it is relevant to my taking part in this research.	
I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the lead researcher should my contact details change.	

Name of participant	
Participant's signature	
Date	
Name of lead researcher	
Signature	
Date*	

*To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant.

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/ pre-written script/ information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be kept with the project's main documents which must be kept in a secure location.

Appendix 5: Informed consent form for children (participants)

01 Jul 2021
 Shichong Li
 School of Education
 University of Leeds
 Leeds
 LS2 9JT
 United Kingdom

Dear potential participants:

Thank you for being interested in my research.

The research is exploring your relation with peers when your biological parents are away from home. It is mainly focusing on how you interact, and what counts for you during your interactions. The reasons I want to know more about peer relations of you are: to get to know you and your daily life more under boarding system so that more people (including your biological parents, teachers and others from society) would know how to help you when you need help; to get to know what happened between you and your peers in school when teachers and biological parents are away (for example, how your peers treat you, and vice versa); to see if there is any problem still remain unsolved between you and your peers; to see how you use your own strength to solve your own problems with the help of peers.

You are considered eligible and welcome to attend my research, if you meet the following requirements:

- 12, 14 or 15 years old (if you aged 13, you are welcome to enquire)
- Chinese
- have the experience of living apart from your biological parents(usually either your mother or father or both)

In this research, I would:

- invite you to attend one-to-one online interviews, and each of them is taking around 30-60 minutes
- invite you to chat with me online in a form of keeping a diary or log in order to make some reflection between our interviews
- protect your privacy, and your name and personal data will be kept confidential
- not share anything you told me to anyone else

You can withdraw from my research any time they want without giving a reason during my data collection. However, you could not withdraw from my research after I finish my data collection (July 31st, 2022). You could request your data to be withdrawn within one month (August 31st, 2022) after I finish my data collection. Both of the dates that I mentioned above are judged by the feasibility of my research: I plan to collect my data for about 6 months (from February 1st to July 31st, 2022). If you withdraw your data at any time you want during my whole research, I might not be able to finish my research promptly. I will also delete data if they want to withdraw. If a request is made after the dates that I mentioned, data could not be withdrawn. Please understand that.

If you do not feel comfortable and you want to stop the interviews or instant messaging, here are some other resources of support that you can reach to:

- 1) School counselling service (I will ask school administrators or teachers at Emei No.3 Middle School, Emei No.4 Middle School to get the relevant contacts);

- 2) Support from social workers of Leshan Women's Federation (address: No.510, Boyang Middle Road, Shizhong District, Leshan city, Sichuan Province, postcode: 614000, tel: 0833-2443237);
- 3) Support from charity (Blue Letter Project tel: 020-34258106 email: contact@bluelettercn.org);

Please look at more details in Information Sheet for participants.

Taking part in this research is always optional. If you decided to take part in the study, please sign this form.

If you would like to obtain more research information or make enquiry, please contact the researcher:

Shichong Li
 Email: edsl@leeds.ac.uk
 WeChat: lsc_alison
 QQ: 332835338

Thank you for your time
 Sincerely,
 Shichong Li

**Consent to take part in Children's agency in peer relations:
 taking Chinese left-behind children as an example**

Add your
 initials
 next to
 the
 statement
 if you
 agree

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet/ letter dated (01/07/2021) explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.	
I understand that members of the research team may have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential.	
I understand that the data collected from me may be stored and used in relevant future research in an anonymised form or I understand that the data I provide may be archived at the Leeds University One Drive.	
I understand that relevant sections of the data collected during the study, may be looked at by individuals from the University of Leeds or from regulatory authorities where it is relevant to my taking part in this research.	
I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the lead researcher should my contact details change.	

Name of participant	
Participant's signature	
Date	
Name of lead researcher	
Signature	
Date*	

*To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant.

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/ pre-written script/ information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be kept with the project's main documents which must be kept in a secure location.

Appendix 6: Verbal informed consent for children and parents (guardians)

This is a summary of verbal informed consent, including general consent questions for adults and children who will be involved in this research.

Name of participant: _____

Before we start, I have to ask you to confirm each of the following statements:
[I will use audio recording during the whole process of doing verbal consent with adults and children to check agreement of the statements listed below. Then, the recording will be transcribed and kept privately.]

1. you confirm that you have read the information sheet and understood the background information for this research project
2. you confirm that have had the opportunity to ask any question and concern you have about this project and the way to carry out research (i.e. interviews and diaries/logs), and all answers have been provided to your satisfaction
3. you confirm that you agree to/agree for your children/child to take part in my research voluntarily
4. you confirm that you understand you/your child/children are free to withdraw/return your participation at any stage of this research and do not need to give a reason (details can be found in the written version, or I will explain you details if you want)
5. you confirm that you understand that this research will be audio-recorded/video-recorded unless you reject
6. you confirm that you understand that what you/your child/children tell me in this research will be used in my PhD thesis and probably other academic reports, conference and publications but not in a form that will allow you or your family/friends/teachers/people around you to be identified
7. you confirm that you understand all your/your child/children personal information will be anonymised and kept confidentially

Thank you very much for your support!