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From the Last Row of the Classroom to the Top Page of Kuaishou: an ethnographic study of Chinese rural students' struggle for recognition across school and social media

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From the Last Row of the Classroom to the Top Page of *Kuaishou*:
an ethnographic study of Chinese rural students' struggle for recognition across school and social media

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Abstract

In contemporary China, dominant school discourses have marginalised students frequently labelled as "low achievers", "disengaged" or "disruptive", particularly in rural contexts. While a few studies have documented non-conforming behaviours among these students, there remains limited understanding of their lived schooling experiences and how they construct meaning and identity within and beyond the school environment. Meanwhile, the growing accessibility of mobile technologies in rural China has opened new spaces for youth identity formation and cultural participation beyond traditional educational boundaries. This study investigates how rural students' lived experiences at school intersect with their digital engagement to shape new forms of self-expression and belonging.

The research is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a rural boarding middle school in Southwest China, combining in-school observations and interviews with 22 students, alongside online ethnography of their activities on *Kuaishou*, a short-video platform widely used by rural youth. Drawing on Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, the study adopts an interpersonal lens to examine how marginalised students experience relational dynamics at school and create alternative structures of recognition among peers.

The findings first analyse the dominant recognition structures within the school, showing how various forms of felt disrespect students experienced in interacting with teachers - lack of care, unequal treatment and devaluation - undermine students' sense of worth and self-understanding. In response to such disrespectful experiences, students formed oppositional communities as alternative spaces of recognition. At school, they developed what is locally known as *luan* ("disorder") culture - a collective identity rooted in non-conformity and peer solidarity. Online, this oppositional identity was extended through the creation of *post-jingshen* ("post-spirit") culture on *Kuaishou*, characterised by distinct visual and textual styles that subvert conventional youth norms. These digital presentations mirrored their offline practices, offering new modes of visibility, peer recognition and identity affirmation beyond institutional authority.

Importantly, the construction of such alternative recognition structures remains continuously negotiated within and shaped by institutional power structures and the socio-technological affordances of digital platforms. By exploring the interplay between schooling and youth cultural production across physical and digital spaces, this study offers an in-depth understanding of rural youth identity and agency in China, and new insights into educational marginalisation, school culture and digital youth culture in a non-Western context.

Statement of copyright

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without the author's prior written consent and information derived from it should be acknowledged.

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Chapter 1 Setting the scene: studying marginalised students in China

1.1 Opening: a scene in the mountains

I finally arrived, after crossing several mountains. His family kept cattle and pigs. When I walked in, he was cutting up chicken for the evening's barbecue. Later, he went out to fetch water for the cows. The pigs in the pen were squealing nonstop. A few other boys had also been invited. They were inside, huddled together, playing mobile games.

I was struck by how capable they were. These were the same boys often scolded at school for not studying or messing around. Yet here they were, taking the lead - killing chickens and fish (they had caught four big ones), washing vegetables, preparing the seasoning, and cooking. At one point, they asked me if the seasoning was enough. That's when I realised that, technically, I was the only "adult" in the room.

Some boys went out to take photos - arms stretched wide, pretending to embrace the mountains. Afterwards, they sent the pictures to a boy with an iPhone for editing, then uploaded them to *Kuaishou*, a short video platform. One of them proudly showed me his editing tricks and a few minutes later, he told me with excitement, "Look! I just posted and already got over 6,000 views. Lately my numbers have been high - one even got 9,000!"

Over dinner, one said to me, "Isn't this so much better than being alone at school, teacher? You can write all this in your dissertation - just don't use our names." They knew I often spent weekends alone at school. Another added, "Don't forget us when you leave. If you delete us, I'll never speak to you again."

"When are you going back to the UK?" someone asked.

"Wait, teacher's from the UK?" a boy who didn't know me asked.

"You didn't know? She's studying in the UK!" my two participants next to me shouted proudly, as if showing me off. It made me shy - I lowered my head, smiling.

The boy sitting next to me kept putting food on my plate. The smoke from the grill was so thick, I could hardly keep my eyes open.

At night, lying on bed my body felt exhausted, but my mind remained awake. It reminded me of my earlier experiences as a volunteer teacher at this school, when I would visit students' homes just like this. But this time felt different. I found myself observing their social lives from a new perspective - one less concerned with whether these activities distracted them from studying, and more focused on understanding their world without judgment or the urge to "correct" their behaviours and redirect them toward academic achievement. (Fieldnote, Saturday, 1 July 2023)

This vignette is drawn from a fieldnote about a visit to a student's home[1] where I was invited to join a Saturday evening barbecue. Initially, I hesitated because of the travel inconvenience. But when I woke up that morning and saw numerous missed calls, I changed my mind. I did not want to disappoint them after such a warm invitation, and I also recognised it as a valuable opportunity to build rapport and observe their lives outside of school. In the end, it became one of the most memorable moments of my fieldwork. As this vignette illustrates, I had some level of connection, as well as disconnection from the place and the people there.

1.1.1 What is this study about

This vignette offers a contextual background of my study and highlights key aspects of my research. Firstly, the study is situated in a mountainous rural area in Yunnan, China, where local households have relatively low socio-economic status and rely heavily on farming and raising livestock[2]. My research participants are a group of middle school students often described in terms such as "school-disengaged", "deviant", "disruptive", "non-conformists", or simply "bad students" in the Chinese context - labels reflecting how they are positioned on the margins of the educational system and broader society.

The vignette also illustrates how students spent their leisure time: playing mobile games and engaging with social media. The student's excitement about the number of views his video

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[1] It is a common practice for teachers to visit student homes in the local context.
[2] In 2024, China's per capita disposable income was ¥41,314, whereas Yunnan's was ¥29,932 (rural: ¥17,450).

received on *Kuaishou* reflects the value placed on social validation through digital content creation[3].

These two dimensions - academic marginalisation and digital engagement - form the focus of this study: an exploration of how marginalised rural youth navigate academic expectations and digital worlds in contemporary China.

This vignette also illustrates my approach to understanding children and youth as active agents - individuals who construct their own social worlds within adult-dominated structures (Corsaro, 1997). It is essential to understand how they make meaning of their experiences from their own perspectives, rather than imposing adult values onto their lives. This perspective shapes both my positioning in the research and the relatively equitable relationships I sought to build with the participants. Meanwhile, the barbecue scene not only shows the rapport between us, but also how power dynamics shifted: I was no longer in a position of authority. Instead, they hosted me on their terms, in their space. These shifting power dynamics are discussed further in the methodology chapter.

Finally, by focusing on a group of young people who are largely invisible both in mainstream discourse and academic research, this study seeks to centre their voices by exploring how they interpret and navigate their social worlds. In doing so, I aim to contribute to a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of youth experiences in rural China, one that values diverse forms of knowledge, expression and agency.

1.1.2 My positionality and why am I interested

Following a brief introduction to the study, this section explains my positionality and personal interest in the topic, rooted in my own schooling and teaching experiences.

Inspired by Paul Willis's book *Being Modern in China* (2019), particularly the chapter in which his Chinese university students reflect on their experiences with school "non-conformists", I was prompted to revisit my own encounters with this group and reflect on how my perspectives have evolved over time. As this study focuses on "non-conforming" students, critically examining my own positionality has been crucial in acknowledging the subjectivity I bring to the research.

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[3] Participants perceived the number of views as a measure of popularity and validation, as will be discussed in Chapter 7.

I grew up in a village in Southeast China, then moved to town at age ten. The primary school in the village was just next door, but my parents sent me to a school in town which they believed could offer better education. From my first day at school, I was a model student - attentive, obedient and successful in exams. As Willis (2019) notes, schooling dominates the lives of many Chinese students, with few alternative institutions available for organising feelings and emotion. This insight accurately reflects my own experience: during my school years, I spent most of my time studying, with little time or space to attend to my well-being, as schoolwork constantly occupied my mind. I also strongly associated my sense of identity with academic success, just as most teachers and parents did. It seemed to me that failing academically meant being of no value at all. This mindset reflects the dominant ideology in China that prioritises schooling and equates test scores with self-worth. I now recognise that this meritocratic worldview has shaped my thinking for many years.

I never imagined myself as one of the "bad students" - those who were ranked at the bottom and constantly being scolded or punished. When I saw them being reprimanded for poor behaviour or low grades, I felt lucky not to be in their position. I also paid them little attention. We rarely interacted as if we lived in parallel worlds even though we shared the same classroom. Occasionally I felt sympathy for them being mistreated by teachers. Yet, more often, I believed they brought it upon themselves by not behaving or trying hard enough. Alongside my indifference, I had mixed feelings about these people - a blend of curiosity, jealousy and even admiration. I often wondered how they coped with academic failure and discipline, yet they seemed carefree, enjoying experiences I never had: fighting, karaoke, fashion, dating. While I did not want to be one of them, I also tried to avoid the "nerd" label by staying active on social media and dressing slightly more stylishly. This reflects the ongoing negotiation of identity shaped by the stereotypes of both groups.

While my parents never said it explicitly, I knew many parents would tell their children to avoid the "bad kids" so as not to be negatively influenced. A deskmate in high school once wrote me a note: "If it weren't for the clear line between good and bad students, maybe we could have become closer friends". The system has long perpetuated these categories and divisions, and in doing so, normalised them.

After completing my undergraduate degree and working for a year, I joined a volunteer teaching programme and spent two years at a rural middle school where I later returned to conduct fieldwork for this study. My decision was driven by a desire to inspire rural students

by sharing my own educational journey and offering them different perspectives on future possibilities. I remember being asked at a conference presentation whether I personally saw these students as "good" or "bad". I admitted that I once preferred high-achieving students because their academic success validated my teaching. I often felt frustrated with underachieving students who did not seem to try, despite my efforts. In the process of conducting the research, my perspective has shifted - I began to see them not through the lens of academic success, but as unique and equal individuals who are navigating a system that often fails them.

From ignoring them in school, to judging them as a teacher, to feeling guilt when I started to study them and reflected on my positionality - I have now come to recognise their agency. I asked: **how has the system shaped their identities, and how do they navigate it on their own terms?** I was hoping to understand their social worlds and informal cultures, not through labels and binaries, but through their own eyes.

As Willis (2019) points out, "in the past, there is little general or popular recognition of school non-conformism in China as a topic of any importance or worthy of serious comment. At best it is seen as an annoying, random or mystifying problem..." (p. 169). So far, there has been limited research on this group of students, especially in rural China, where informal youth culture remains largely invisible. By documenting how my own thinking has evolved, I hope to highlight how personal beliefs can shape how we see others and ourselves. Instead of marginalising or dismissing them, this study set out to explore what school means to these students, and how they carve out their own spaces for agency and self-expression that are often denied within the formal educational system.

1.2 Research context

This section introduces the broader context of the study by discussing rural students and educational marginalisation in China, followed by an overview of the digital landscape and rural youth's interaction with social media.

1.2.1 Rural students and educational marginalisation in China

China's compulsory education system consists of six years of primary school (ages 6-12), followed by three years of middle school (ages 13-16). The transition from middle school to high school is often seen as a crucial time in a student's educational trajectory and a key site

of social and class stratification (Woronov, 2016). Academic performance during middle school years, particularly in the highly competitive High School Entrance Examination (*Zhongkao*), largely determines whether students can remain on the academic track or are diverted into vocational education or directly into the labour market.

In the competitive exam-centred system, not every student is able to "succeed", and many must, by design, "fail" (Brown et al., 1997). This is especially true for rural students, who continue to face long-standing inequalities in access to quality education and resources. For many, underperformance in *Zhongkao* often results in a return to their parents' paths as farmers or migrant labourers, thereby reproducing the existing social hierarchies. Despite the high stakes of this transition, school dropout remains a persistent issue in rural areas. A large-scale survey found that between 4.4% and 13.3% of students left school between the start of middle school (age 13) and their second year (age 14) (Shi et al., 2015).

However, beyond those who formally drop out, a growing number of students become what researchers describe as "hidden" or "invisible" dropouts - those who are physically present in school yet mentally disengaged (Zhang & Kong, 2020). Often referred to as "school-disengaged", these students show little motivation or participation in class (Makarova & Herzog, 2013). Several studies also suggest that these students often developed a sense of disillusionment with the promise of education as a vehicle for upward mobility (Liu & Xie, 2017; W. Wang, 2022; Zhang, 2022).

While school dropout and disengagement have become more visible in recent years, particularly in rural China, academic research in this area remains limited. Most existing studies on rural students focus either on their access to higher education (see Li et al., 2015; Xie & Reay, 2020) or on the educational experiences and outcomes of rural-origin migrant students in cities (see Chen & Feng, 2013; Gu & Yeung, 2020). Much less attention has been given to rural middle school students, especially those who are academically low-achieving and disengaged and who occupy the margins of the education system.

This marginalisation is not only structural but also deeply cultural. Rooted in Confucian values, Chinese society has long prioritised academic achievement over practical or vocational skills - a hierarchy that continues to shape educational ideals today (G. Wang, 2022a). For rural students in particular, the dominant discourse around education, reinforced by teachers and parents, constructs academic success as the only legitimate route to a better

life (Hong, 2021; G. Wang, 2022b; Xiang, 2018). Within this context, students are disciplined and measured through a system that positions test scores as the ultimate marker of personal worth. This suggests that school may have become not just a space for learning, but one in which self-value is closely tied to academic performance. This means that students with low attainment are likely to develop negative self-perceptions as incapable or inferior compared to high-achieving peers in an environment where they are continuously judged by test scores (Hong, 2021; G. Wang, 2022b).

As Willis (2019) argues, for students on the margins, peer communities often become essential: a space in which individual struggles are transformed into a shared sense of social destiny, one with its own values and meaning. Studies in Western contexts have explored how school-based subcultures form in response to academic sorting and school hierarchies. For instance, Willis's (1977) *Learning to Labour* documented how "the lads" developed oppositional identities in defiance of a school system they saw as irrelevant to their futures. Hargreaves (1967) described a split between an "academic" subculture, formed by high-achieving students who conformed to school norms, and a "delinquescent" subculture among lower-stream students who rejected academic values and school authority.

While these studies offer important insights into how student identity and culture are shaped by educational structures, much less is known about how these dynamics play out in the Chinese context. A few recent studies have highlighted the marginalisation faced by academically low-performing students in China, noting that they are often made to feel ignored, invisible, or marginalised in classroom settings (Gao et al., 2019; Wan, 2022; W. Wang, 2022). Yet their own voices, experiences, and meaning-making processes remain largely absent in the literature. Little is known regarding how these students understand their position within the academic hierarchy at school, how they relate to peers and teachers, or whether and in which ways they construct alternative identities or value systems in response to their marginalisation.

This study addresses this issue by placing students' voices and agency at the centre of analysis. It asks: How do low-achieving students perceive their position within the school's academic hierarchy? How do they construct and express their identities, not only individually, but collectively within a system that defines them primarily by their failure to meet academic standards? The research began with broad questions around how these students experience school, how they see themselves, and what meaning they attach to

education and success. As the research developed and the theoretical framework (discussed in Chapter Three) took shape, the focus narrowed to the role of interpersonal relationships, particularly with peers and teachers and how these shape students' self-perceptions and potentially foster the development of alternative identities or value systems.

By exploring the lived experiences of marginalised students, this study foregrounds the voices often excluded from dominant educational narratives centred on exam-based success. It offers a nuanced understanding of school structures, identity formation and informal youth culture in rural China.

1.2.2 Digital culture and rural youth

Over the past few decades, rural China has experienced a rapid increase in internet accessibility. With improvements in infrastructure, policies supporting digital inclusion, and increasing affordability of smartphones, internet access in rural areas has steadily expanded (CNNIC, 2024). By December 2024, the number of rural internet users reached 313 million, accounting for 28.2% of all internet users in China (CNNIC, 2025). Over the past decade, rural internet penetration increased significantly from 28.8% in 2014 to 65.6% in 2024 (CNNIC, 2015, 2025). Although rural populations were generally late adopters of internet technologies compared to urban residents, they have become increasingly active in incorporating digital technologies into everyday life. As Oreglia (2014) notes, rural users are not passive recipients of digital technology but active participants who adapt and repurpose it to meet local needs and social contexts.

Young people in particular have emerged as one of the most active groups in China's digital landscape, particularly in their use of social media for communication, self-expression, and social networking (McDonald, 2016). They are not only consumers of online content but also creators who regularly produce and share photos, videos, and personal narratives that document their everyday lives (Lin & de Kloet, 2019). Yet, despite their growing engagement, rural youth remain underrepresented in internet research. A comprehensive review of China's internet studies between 1989 and 2012 found that only 2.7% of studies focused on rural populations and only 5.3% included students or young people as research subjects (Qiu & Bu, 2013).

This invisibility is mirrored in studies of youth (sub)cultures, which have been largely dominated by urban youth narratives. Urban areas are often viewed as the primary spaces for

cultural expression and identity construction, while rural youth remain largely invisible (Zhao, 2019). In recent years, scholars have examined urban-originated online subcultures such as *diaosi* culture (Szablewicz, 2014), *sang* culture (Tan & Cheng, 2020), *lie-flat* culture (Su, 2023), and *buddha-like* youth (Shu, 2021), which reflect urban responses to economic pressure, social anxiety, and disillusionment. However, these cultural frameworks do not necessarily capture the distinct lived experiences of rural youth, who navigate a very different set of structural constraints and social contexts. Critical engagement with their digital lives is essential for expanding our understanding of youth and digital culture beyond urban-centric narratives. This study responds to this overlooked area by focusing on academically marginalised rural students' engagement with a social media platform *Kuaishou*. The following section explains why *Kuaishou* was selected as the focus of this research.

In recent years, digital expression has shifted from text-based interaction to visually driven platforms. As of December 2024, short-video users in China reached 1,040 million, making up 93.8% of all internet users (CNNIC, 2025). Short-video apps like *Douyin* and its international version, *TikTok*, powered by algorithmic recommendation systems, have become particularly popular among teenagers and young adults (Zeng et al., 2021). By offering a variety of standardised templates for easy creation, these platforms have blurred boundaries between producers and consumers and empowered ordinary users to become creative producers (Kaye et al., 2021). Among these short-video platforms, *Kuaishou*, the focus of this study, has gained popularity with a large user base among rural and less educated young people (Zhai, 2017).

Unlike *Douyin*, which is often associated with urban aesthetics and aspirational lifestyles, *Kuaishou* has become known for its more inclusive algorithm and grassroots content. Hou (2021) notes that the platform provides visibility to users who are typically marginalised in mainstream media, particularly rural and lower-income youth. Recent studies have begun to examine how these young people use *Kuaishou* to articulate alternative identities. For example, Hou (2020, 2021) explored *hanmai*, a form of online rap performance through which rural youth express dissatisfaction with limited opportunities and resist dominant norms. Li et al. (2020) examined *shehui ren* ("society people"), a digital identity based on a streetwise, defiant persona. While admired by students for its perceived independence and resilience, this identity was also viewed with ambivalence due to its associations with precarity and illegality (Hearn, 2021). These examples highlight how digital practices are not

only acts of self-expression but also reflections of the tensions young people experience as they navigate life on the social and educational margins.

Participants in this study share many characteristics with those examined in the above works: they are from socioeconomically disadvantaged rural backgrounds and have fallen outside the mainstream academic pathway. This research builds on emerging scholarship around rural youth digital practices by exploring how students who are disengaged in school might turn to platforms like *Kuaishou* to express agency, forge community, and claim visibility.

As Willis (2019) suggests, students excluded from academic success often engage in cultural production through music, fashion, or digital media as a way to assert autonomy and derive self-worth outside institutional structures. Digital media, in particular, may offer a space for "school-disengaged" youth to explore alternative forms of expression and self-making. This connects with boyd's (2008, 2014) observation that young people's engagement with digital platforms is often a rational response to their social conditions, marked by adaptability, resilience, and creative repurposing of technologies. In Reckwitz's (2020) terms, digital media functions as a "culture and affect machine" (p. 169-170), disrupting traditional hierarchies and enabling individuals - regardless of social status - to represent themselves in unprecedented ways. In this context, social media may offer marginalised students a means to reclaim agency and redefine self-worth on their own terms.

This study is also built on the assumption that youth's online and offline cultural practices are intricately interconnected, as demonstrated in previous research (Bennett, 2004; Wilson, 2006; Wilson & Atkinson, 2005). In particular, studies have highlighted that the everyday lives of young people, particularly in institutional contexts such as schools, are highly structured and regulated by adult authority. Social media, in this sense, does not merely supplement face-to-face communication, but serves as an extension of institutional environments, a place where young people can exercise greater agency, express themselves more freely, and build peer-based communities (boyd, 2014; Hansen, 2015; Milner, 2004).

Therefore, this study examines not only how students participate in digital spaces but also how these practices reflect, shape or connect with their schooling experiences, self-perceptions, and peer relationships. By focusing on the everyday use of *Kuaishou* among academically marginalised students, this research explores how digital expression interacts

with institutional norms and educational hierarchies and whether it enables new forms of identity and cultural construction.

Many existing Internet studies in China adopt a technocentric approach, focusing narrowly on access, usage, or technological impact, while overlooking how users actively shape and find meaning in their digital practices (McDonald, 2016). Few have centred the voices of rural youth or connected their digital engagement to the cultural dynamics of school life. This study adopts an ethnographic approach to foreground the lived experiences of these youth, both online and at school, through the lens of recognition theory (Honneth, 1995). It investigates how students seek respect, affirmation, and belonging in digital and educational contexts.

It is also important to acknowledge that "rural China" is not a monolithic category. As Wallis (in Oreglia et al., 2015) emphasises, rural areas can range from highly developed peri-urban regions to remote communities with little infrastructure. My own upbringing in a more developed rural village in southeast China contrasts with the field site of this study, which was located in a more economically marginalised setting. Although digital access has improved nationally, many non-users remain concentrated in rural areas (CNNIC, 2025). This study does not aim to generalise across all rural youth but instead offers an in-depth qualitative analysis of a specific group: academically disengaged but digitally active students negotiating marginalisation and empowerment.

In summary, the increasing accessibility of internet technologies has enabled new spaces for rural youth to participate in cultural creation and identity articulation, which may not be available for them in formal schooling spaces. By examining how this group of people express agency, seek recognition, and navigate marginalisation across online and offline domains, this study contributes original knowledge to underexplored areas of educational marginalisation, youth digital culture, and the social lives of rural students in China. It also offers practical insights for educators, policymakers, and practitioners committed to supporting marginalised youth in a rapidly digitising society (discussed in Chapter 9).

1.3 Research aims and questions

Based in a rural Chinese context, this study explores the lived experiences of academically marginalised students and the role of social media, particularly the short-video platform

Kuaishou in their everyday lives. In particular, it examines how these students' digital practices intersect with their schooling experiences, identity formation, and cultural expression. Drawing on ethnographic methods and recognition theory, the study aims to shed light on how young people who are positioned at the educational margins navigate institutional constraints and seek forms of visibility, agency, and belonging both online and offline.

This study is guided by the following research questions (RQs):

RQ 1: What are the schooling experiences of academically low-achieving students?
This question investigates students' everyday interactions within the school environment, particularly their relationships with peers and teachers. It considers how these social dynamics shape their sense of self, belonging, and identity within the school context.

RQ 2: How do these students navigate academic failure and their marginal status within the school system?
This question explores how students respond to their positioning as low-achieving learners. It focuses on the ways they negotiate their marginal status, assert agency, and construct alternative forms of value and identity within the school setting.

RQ 3: What role does social media play in their everyday lives, particularly in relation to identity and cultural expression?
This question examines how students engage with *Kuaishou* as a platform for self-expression, cultural production, and community building. It investigates how their digital practices relate to, reflect, or shape their educational experiences.

1.4 Thesis structure

This thesis consists of nine chapters. This first chapter introduces the research context, significance, research questions and overall structure. The remaining chapters are organised as follows:

Chapter Two presents a review of the literature on the lived experiences and cultural practices of young people in China, with a particular focus on rural and school-disengaged students. It begins by examining how academic labelling and informal tracking shape students' self-perceptions and everyday school experiences, highlighting how low-achieving

and disengaged students often face emotional and relational exclusion. This is followed by an exploration of existing theoretical approaches to understanding student resistance and cultural production within schools. The chapter then turns to rural youth culture in China, using the example of *Shamate* to illustrate how marginalised young people construct identity and community. Broader debates on youth and digital media are then reviewed, including discussions of self-presentation and social relationships online. The final section focuses on short-video platforms, especially *Kuaishou*, as important spaces where marginalised youth perform identity and seek visibility. This literature review lays the foundation for understanding the interrelated schooling and digital experiences in the lives of marginalised youth in contemporary China.

Chapter Three outlines the theoretical framework underpinning this study, using recognition theory as the primary lens to understand students' identity development in their interactions with teachers and peers in their social environment. The chapter introduces the core concepts and arguments of recognition theory and critically engages with its relationship to power and domination. It then reviews how the theory has been applied in educational and digital media contexts to situate it within the focus of this research. This chapter establishes the conceptual basis for the analysis and interpretation of the empirical findings in the study.

Chapter Four outlines the methodological framework adopted in the study, which used an ethnographic approach to explore students' schooling experiences and digital practices on *Kuaishou*. It begins by explaining the rationale for combining school-based and online ethnography, followed by a description of the research site, access and recruitment process, and the two main methods used: participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The chapter then reflects upon my dual role as substitute teacher and researcher, and how it shaped field relations. Ethical considerations are discussed in relation to working with young people, the use of online data, and dilemmas that arose during fieldwork. My reflections on the emotional labour of ethnographic research and its methodological significance are also discussed. The final section outlines the analytical approach used in the study.

Chapters Five, **Six** and **Seven** present the key findings of the study, corresponding respectively to Research Questions 1, 2, and 3. Chapter Five and Six explore how matters of recognition are played out in the school context. **Chapter Five** examines students' experiences of disrespect in the school environment and how these experiences impact their ability to achieve self-realisation and autonomy. It explores three forms of disrespect felt by

students primarily in their interaction with teachers, which contributes to moral and emotional suffering and negative self-conceptions. The withdrawal of recognition in the school environment has become a source of motivation for students to seek alternative ways to assert their self-worth. Building on this, **Chapter Six** explores how students responded to the inadequate recognition and disrespect they received at school. It investigates the ways in which students challenged the dominant recognition order and constructed a new structure of recognition in their own terms. A key focus is on how students constructed a countercultural identity *luan* as an alternative means of affirming and supporting each other. The construction of this *luan* culture represents more than resistance to school norms; it is an active attempt to build a recognition structure rooted in shared experiences of marginalisation. This pursuit of recognition also unfolded in tension with institutional power and accordingly, students adopted two primary strategies in negotiating the power relations at school. **Chapter Seven** shifts the focus to the digital space, analysing students' digital engagement on a short video platform *Kuaishou*. It explores how social media reconfigures participants' ongoing struggles for recognition, drawing on their online posts, interactions and personal narratives. Participants have actively constructed a post-*jingshen* culture on the platform where they presented a distinctive stylistic self-presentation and formed a supportive and affirmative community among themselves. Three key mechanisms of mediated recognition have been identified, through which young people in the study affirmed their sense of self-worth, identity and social belonging within digitally mediated spaces.

Chapter Eight provides an in-depth discussion of the study's key findings. It begins by analysing the nature of disrespect participants experienced at school, linking these experiences to broader social hierarchies and discussing different categorisation of disrespect. It then explores how students' countercultural identities - *luan* at school and post-*jingshen* online - are interconnected, showing how these identities are negotiated across offline and digital spaces. Finally, the chapter critically examines whether the subcultural communities students formed offer a sufficient mode of recognition to foster autonomy and self-realisation.

Chapter Nine concludes the thesis by summarising the key findings and addressing the research questions. It outlines the main contributions of the study, including its contribution to academic knowledge as well as implications for policy and practice. The chapter also

offers reflections on the research process and suggests directions for future research. Finally, it presents some final remarks to close the thesis.

Chapter 2 Reviewing the landscape: schooling, youth culture and digital media

Chapter overview

The introductory chapter outlined the research context, significance and research questions. To situate the study within the broader body of knowledge, this chapter provides a review of literature on the topic to identify key concepts, arguments and controversies that are worth further investigation.

Corresponding to the two core areas of inquiry in this research, this chapter is structured into two main parts - a review of literature on students' schooling experiences and their engagement with social media. The first part reviews literature on academically marginalised and school-disengaged students, focusing on how school structures contribute to their marginal position and influence self-perception and relational experiences. This is followed by an examination of student resistance and school-based cultural production as expressions of agency, drawing comparisons between Western and Chinese contexts.

The second part moves beyond the school environment to consider rural youth culture in China, focusing on the *Shamate* subculture as a case that exemplifies how marginalised young people construct collective identities through stylistic expression. From there, the review turns to the broader field of youth digital engagement, exploring how young people present themselves, build relationships and construct meaning through online platforms. The final section narrows this lens to examine rural youth cultural participation and creation on *Kuaishou* - a rapidly growing and understudied area.

Taken together, the literature reviewed reveals a limited body of research that directly addresses how marginalised rural youth in China express cultural agency both within schools and on digital platforms. Although some Western literature offers valuable theoretical and empirical insights, studies situated in the Chinese context remain scarce, especially those that centre young people's voices and lived experiences. This review, therefore, not only outlines the existing knowledge landscape but also positions this study as a response to underexplored questions around educational marginalisation, identity and cultural production in contemporary rural China.

2.1 Researching academically marginalised and school-disengaged students

The segregation of students based on academic performance - often referred to as ability grouping or streaming - remains a common feature of educational systems across many countries, including the UK and China (Hallam & Parsons, 2013; Li et al., 2018). Advocates of this practice argue that it allows instruction to be tailored to students' academic levels, thereby enabling high-achieving students to be sufficiently challenged while providing additional support to those who struggle (Slavin, 1990). However, a growing body of critical research highlights the unintended consequences of ability grouping, particularly for students placed in lower sets or tracks.

Studies have consistently shown that students labelled as "low-ability" often experience diminished self-esteem, negative self-perceptions and alienation from school. For example, Ball's (1981) ethnographic study of a British comprehensive school illustrated how low expectations from teachers shaped the identities and motivation of lower-stream students. More recent work has built on such findings. Hargreaves (2019) found that students allocated to the low ability set tended to develop feelings of inferiority and exclusion at school where they were segregated physically and socially from high-achieving peers. Buchanan et al. (2020) similarly reported that low-attaining students frequently linked academic struggle to future failure, resulting in anxiety, stress and a diminished sense of well-being. In the Irish context, McGillicuddy and Devine (2020) found that being placed in low-ability groups was associated with low status, low self-worth and shame. While ability grouping may appear to be a pragmatic instructional tool, these studies suggest that it has negative consequences beyond pedagogy as it intersects with how students are seen, valued and positioned within school. It thus raises broader concerns about the results-driven education systems where test scores are not only a measure of academic performance, but can be an indicator of personal worth. Within such systems, ability grouping creates visible and lasting hierarchies that shape how students are perceived and how they come to perceive themselves.

In China, although the Ministry of Education officially banned ability-based tracking in compulsory education settings in 2006, the practice continues in more subtle and informal forms (Li et al., 2018). Rather than through formal labelling, stratification often occurs through everyday practices such as spatial arrangements. Research has shown that classroom seating plans are commonly used as a form of implicit tracking, with high-performing students placed at the front and low-performing ones at the back (W. Wang, 2022; Zhang,

2019, 2021). These spatial arrangements subtly but powerfully reproduce academic hierarchies, reinforcing the status of students through their physical placement.

Research from China aligns with international findings in highlighting the relational and emotional consequences of academic labelling. Hong (2021) found that students labelled as underachievers developed low expectations for themselves and a persistent sense of inadequacy. Wang's (2022b) study showed that many students not oriented toward academic achievement experienced "judgmental relations" with teachers and parents, leading to enduring feelings of inferiority. Similarly, Li et al. (2018) found that students in slower-tracked groups reported lower levels of interpersonal trust and more frequent experiences of apathy, verbal abuse and indifference from teachers, in contrast to the encouragement and support reported by students in higher-performing groups. These findings point to the emotional and relational dimensions of academic marginalisation: those who fail to meet institutional standards are often not only structurally disadvantaged, but also emotionally and relationally marginalised.

Often, poor academic performance can be a measure of disengagement (Tam et al., 2012). School disengagement is commonly conceptualised across three interrelated dimensions: behavioural, cognitive, and emotional (Fredricks et al., 2019; Zhang & Kong, 2020). Behavioural disengagement refers to actions such as absenteeism or lack of participation in class. Cognitive disengagement involves superficial learning approaches or a lack of intellectual investment in schoolwork. Emotional disengagement is characterised by feelings of disconnection, boredom or lack of connection to the school. Students who are physically present in school but disengaged across these dimensions are often classified as "hidden dropouts" - a status, if unaddressed, can lead to formal dropout (Makarova & Herzog, 2013).

In rural China, student disengagement and dropout are shaped by intersecting systemic, economic and relational factors. The national curriculum is often based on urban, middle-class norms and knowledge systems, which may feel irrelevant or disconnected from the lived experiences of rural students (Lou, 2011a). Peer dynamics also play a role, with some students influenced by disengaged classmates or the decision of peers to leave school (Gan & Guo, 2022; Gao et al., 2019; Shi et al., 2015). For others, the lure of immediate financial gain through low-skilled labour may appear more practical than continued education (Gao et al., 2019; Shi et al., 2015).

This study focuses on the relational dimension as particularly significant in shaping student experiences. Similar to the findings from studies in academic tracking and labelling, disengaged students frequently describe schools as spaces of neglect and exclusion - especially in relation to teachers, who are often perceived as indifferent or emotionally unavailable (Gao et al., 2019; Wan, 2022). Zhang and Kong (2020) argue that students' engagement is strongly linked to their perception of being cared for and respected. When everyday interactions with teachers are marked by indifference or judgment, students are more likely to disengage not only emotionally, but also cognitively and behaviourally from the learning process.

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that ability grouping, academic labelling and school disengagement are closely interconnected. As shown earlier, being placed in, or labelled as part of a low-attainment group can significantly shape students' self-perceptions and their developing sense of identity. Students assigned to lower academic tracks often experience disengagement across behavioural, cognitive and emotional dimensions, and tend to develop negative interpersonal relationships. This, in turn, fosters feelings of exclusion, inferiority and disconnection - issues that emerge as particularly salient among marginalised students. This study focuses specifically on students' relational experiences within the school context, drawing on recognition theory to link interpersonal interactions with the development of self-understanding. As the following chapter will elaborate, recognition theory offers a valuable framework for analysing how students' everyday interpersonal experiences contribute to their self-concepts.

Importantly, it is within this context of marginalisation and exclusion that student agency can be expressed through informal and often oppositional practices. Many students respond to exclusion by forming peer cultures that resist dominant school norms, often described as "anti-school" or "counter-school" cultures (Moskowitz et al., 2018). These serve both as coping mechanisms and as spaces for constructing alternative identities (Ball, 1981). Abraham (2008) notes that students situated at the lower end of academic hierarchies are especially likely to adopt oppositional attitudes toward school. Likewise, Bottrell (2007) suggests that youth resistance should be understood as a struggle for "chosen identities" - those actively claimed and desired - against "unchosen identities" imposed by adults and institutional structures. Within schools, these imposed labels can lead to marginalisation, prompting acts of resistance that aim to challenge students' subordinate positions and assert

more positive self-representations. The next section will further explore this theme of student resistance and the formation of counter-school cultures.

2.2 Researching resistance and cultural production at school

2.2.1 Class-based resistance theories

There are various theoretical approaches to understanding schooling and student resistance. Reproduction theorists have typically conceptualised schools as institutions that reinforce existing social hierarchies, maintaining and perpetuating social relationships and structures through education (Levinson & Holland, 1996). This approach views schools as mechanisms of cultural and social reproduction. However, such theories have been critiqued for underestimating the role of human agency (Giroux, 1983). In contrast, resistance theories highlight that individuals are not simply passive recipients of social structures and provide a new framework for understanding the behaviours and experiences of subordinate groups (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Resistance theory rejects conventional explanations of oppositional behaviour rooted in functionalist or psychological understandings of student deviance, which often frame such behaviours as individual dysfunction or helplessness. Instead, it reframes resistance as rooted in moral indignation and political struggle. As Giroux (1983) argues, one of the main contributions of resistance theory lies in its claim that "the mechanisms of reproduction are never complete and are always faced with partially realized elements of opposition" (p. 283). For this reason, resistance theory provides a valuable framework for understanding student agency and student culture, particularly in research focused on lived experience.

Cultural production, a key concept within resistance theory, is concerned with understanding how individuals produce oppositional meanings and identities in contexts of inequality and constraint. Cultural production theories seek to bridge the gap between "class" and "culture" in order to better understand the complex ways in which individuals resist domination and make meaning (Giroux, 1983). A seminal example is Paul Willis's (1977) study of how working-class boys end up in working-class jobs. He examined the shared behaviours, practices and meanings of a group of working-class boys, known as "the lads", who formed an oppositional culture within the constraints of the school. Their oppositional culture centred around "having a laff" and resisting the values and rules of the school. However, their resistance ultimately contributed to the reproduction of their class position rather than overcoming it as they reject school and academic success.

The introduction of Paul Willis's work into China has prompted some scholarly interest in the topic of student opposition to schooling. However, as Moskowitz et al. (2018) observe, Chinese researchers often frame counter-school cultures as symptoms of disorder - problems to be addressed in order to promote the development of a more "positive" mainstream culture. In contrast, Willis (1977) recognised the value of the lads' cultural production as a form of working-class resistance to schooling and the middle-class norms.

Superficially, Chinese rural students appear to share similarities with Willis's lads, including disobedience, disruptive behaviour and challenges to authority (Xiong, 2015). However, Zhou (2011) pointed out important distinctions between them. The students in Zhou's study, known as *zidi*, were children of rural migrant workers attending low-performing and poorly resourced urban schools in China. These students faced significant structural barriers to educational attainment. Unlike the lads in Willis's study, who rejected school values and embraced manual labour as part of a masculine working-class identity, the *zidi* still believed in the value of educational qualifications and show little interest in replicating their parents' precarious and low-paid labour. Yet, they also came to view academic success as unachievable and attributed this to personal deficits or their rural backgrounds, eventually losing faith in education as a viable path for social mobility.

Several studies have reported similar findings on the disillusionment experienced by disadvantaged students in China (Li, 2016; Liu & Xie, 2017; W. Wang, 2022; Zhang, 2022). J. Chen (2019) defines this group as "education abandoners" - students who recognise the importance of education but find learning difficult and turn to alternative strategies in search of future success. Similarly, Xiong (2015) identifies "gang students" in migrant schools who, rather than focusing on academic achievement, engaged extensively in leisure activities and expressed a general disinterest in schoolwork. Lou (2011b) established the connection of student resistance to schooling to a broader rejection of urbanisation and identified a group of *xiaohunhun* (literally "little goof-offs") who also perceived limited opportunities through schooling. Putting together, these students' oppositional behaviours and disengagement at school are very likely to result in the reproduction of their class position, just like "the lads" in the UK context.

As mentioned earlier, unlike the critical awareness demonstrated by Willis's lads, many Chinese students do not connect their experiences to structural inequality. Zhou (2011) and Hansen (2015) found that academic failure was often attributed to personal inadequacy. This

raises questions about whether such disengagement should be considered resistance. According to Giroux (1983), the concept of resistance should contain a critique of the dominant ideologies and a struggle for self-emancipation as its guiding interest. In a similar way, Kipnis (2001) introduces the concept of "resistance without counterculture" to describe students who act out or break rules without having an understanding of schooling as a form of social reproduction. He argues that the fully articulated counterculture, which requires a critical awareness of structural inequality, appears to be largely absent among students in China. However, there is emerging evidence that marginalised students have started to develop some critical consciousness (J. Chen, 2019; Li, 2016; Zhang, 2022). For instance, J. Chen (2019) describes some migrant students as "nascent transformative resisters" who are able to recognise the structural injustice of the education system, even if they remain constrained in their ability to challenge dominant school ideologies.

2.2.2 Masculinity and resistance

Willis (1977) also emphasised the role of masculinity in shaping oppositional culture. More recent research has explored how gender and masculinities influence school disengagement and resistance. In Western contexts, scholars have argued that working-class boys engage in forms of oppositional behaviour because academic success is perceived as feminine and incompatible with dominant forms of masculinity (Jackson, 2006a; Mills, 2012; Morris, 2008; Smith, 2007). For these boys, resistance to schoolwork becomes a way of asserting masculine identity and their expression of masculinity often manifests in physical violence and aggression (Morris, 2008). In addition to boy students, some girls also adopted "ladette" behaviours, characterised by defiance and rule-breaking, which are associated with working-class masculinity (Jackson, 2006b).

However, understandings of masculinity differ significantly in the Chinese context. Kipnis (2011) found that academic success was not considered unmasculine by either boys or girls, and that both boys and girls placed value on educational achievement. Louie (2002) proposed the *wen-wu* framework for theorising Chinese masculinities: *wen* (civil) refers to intellectual and cultural accomplishment, while *wu* (martial) refers to physical strength and prowess. In the current educational system in China, the ideal image of a "good student" is often associated with *wen* masculinities, characterised by strong academic achievements. In contrast, aggressiveness and toughness, key features of *wu* masculinities, are negatively perceived by school authorities and labelled as "bad" and "trouble-making" (Dong, 2016;

Wang, 2019). The construction of *wu* masculinities can be paralleled to the western concept of hegemonic masculinities in terms of their association with physical strengths and toughness, yet they are often rejected by institutional discourses in China. So far little is known about how students themselves understand and experience this duality, particularly when their forms of masculine expression are delegitimised within the school environment.

2.2.3 Informal school-based cultures

In addition to class- and gender-based explanations on student oppositional attitudes and behaviours, some scholars have focused on the formation of informal student culture. McLaren (1986), for instance, argues that resistance is not just about challenging dominant power structures, but also about constructing an alternative, informal culture in opposition to the formal culture of the school. McLaren (1986) identifies two main states of interaction: the student state, where students behave in ways aligned with school expectations, and the streetcorner state, where students express autonomy on their own activities and schedule. When they enter into the school, they shift into a more formal and regulated state - student state where they have to play the role of 'students' conforming to the teachers' scripts. Students may attempt to go back to their streetcorner state through either resisting school rituals or make the most of their break time at school. Their disruptive behaviours can be interpreted as their attempts to bring in their streetcorner state inside the school and their oppositional attitudes towards teachers are also affected by teachers' acceptance of their informal cultural forms. In addition, Corrigan (2006) identified another form of informal student culture – "doing nothing" culture, which demonstrates student agency in navigating and subverting a highly institutionalised school system. By simply 'passing the time', students resist the formal routines and meanings imposed by schooling, creating alternative ways of being within the educational environment.

In a similar way to Willis's (1977) distinction between the "lads" and the "ear'oles" (conformists), Hargreaves (1967) identified an "academic subculture" among upper-stream students who conformed to school expectations, and a "delinquescent subculture" among low-stream students who were not academically successful and developed value systems negatively oriented towards school. Hargreaves (1967) observed that this group of non-academic students gained informal social status by conforming to the subcultural values of their peer group. This connects to Milner Jr's (2013) theory of status relations, which argues that young people are preoccupied with peer status systems because such status is their

primary form of power. Within these systems, young people construct informal social worlds in which they evaluate each other based on criteria that differ from those valued by parents or teachers.

In the Chinese context, a small but growing body of research has begun to explore students' formation of informal groups and cultural production within school environments. Liu and Xie (2017), for example, examined a muddling through (*hun*) subculture, similar to the "doing nothing" culture, formed by a group of academically underperforming students from working-class families in a coastal city. Labelled as the "4+1" group by school authorities, these four boys and one girl expressed their resistance through overt defiance and group solidarity, constructing an alternative identity in response to academic failure. This form of oppositional culture echoes the traits associated with *wu* masculinities mentioned earlier. The label "4+1" itself carries a gendered implication, highlighting how resistance is organised through a masculine lens. Similarly, Zhang (2022) documented students in a suburban school who used subtle sonic disruptions - such as noise and silence - as a form of implicit resistance against the dominant disciplinary culture of the school. W. Wang (2022) adopts a spatial perspective, arguing that high-achieving students are afforded privileged access to school spaces, while low-performing or "non-conforming" students experience symbolic and spatial exclusion. In response, marginalised students appropriated space in informal and creative ways, thereby disrupting official uses and meanings of the school environment.

While such "non-conforming" and collective behaviours are frequently interpreted as acts of resistance against school authority, resistance may not be their primary or only intention. Rather, these students may also be seeking to develop alternative skills within the school context (J. Chen, 2019). One recurring theme in literature is their pragmatic shift in values from prioritising academic achievement to investing in informal social knowledge and peer relationships. Several studies show that these students regard social skills and peer networks as more viable strategies for self-making and social navigation than formal academic success (Li et al., 2020; Liu & Xie, 2017; W. Wang, 2022). These practices suggest an active, if implicit, response to structural exclusion - an attempt to construct alternative forms of identity and value systems within constrained educational environments.

Within this body of literature, a group of disadvantaged students in China - whether referred to as *xiaohunhun* ("little goof-offs"), *gang students*, or *muddling through* - consistently display attitudes of disillusionment and oppositional behaviours which often result in further

marginalisation, academic underperformance and school failure. Such studies offer important insights into how educational inequalities are reproduced, and how the promise of upward mobility through schooling is increasingly questioned by those most disadvantaged by the system. Despite valuable empirical insights, much of the existing literature on student resistance in China focuses on rural migrant youth in urban schools, rather than students rooted in local rural contexts. Moreover, these studies tend to frame resistance in terms of structural reproduction, with little attention to how students live through educational failure and construct meaning within and beyond the classroom. Also, their construction of alternative value systems highlights the importance of shifting analytical focus from what students resist to what they actively pursue (Lanas & Corbett, 2011). Instead of viewing their actions simply as "bad behaviour" or oppositional, this study aims to explore the alternative meanings embedded in student agency as they navigate and challenge existing educational structures.

Additionally, while concepts such as resistance and counter-culture are useful for acknowledging student agency, they are limited in capturing the emotional and relational aspects of marginalisation. As discussed earlier in section 2.1, disengaged students often experience relational and emotional detachment which relates to their sense of identity and worth. Moreover, studies suggest that this group of students is more likely to form informal peer cultures as a coping mechanism for their educational marginalisation (Abraham, 2008; Ball, 1981; Bottrell, 2007). This study therefore turns to recognition theory to provide a conceptual framework to bridge relational marginalisation, self-concept and student agency in coping with their everyday realities. Recognition theory allows us to understand students' experiences not simply as reactions to structural disadvantage or policy outcomes, but as deeply lived and relational processes shaped by whether or not they feel seen, respected and valued by others - particularly teachers and peers. As the next chapter will elaborate, this theoretical approach enables a closer examination of the extent to which school environments affirm or deny students' sense of self and how such experiences shape their self-understanding and engagement with education.

2.3 Chinese rural youth culture and the case of *Shamate*

As discussed, there is limited research on Chinese students' lived experience and cultural production within schools. In this section, I turn to youth culture beyond the school context, focusing on the cultural practices of rural youth in China. In particular, I examine the

Shamate culture as an example of how marginalised youth construct identity and community. This discussion sets the stage for the next section on rural youth engagement with digital platforms.

As Zhao (2019) observes, the field of youth culture production in China has long been dominated by urban youth, while rural youth have remained largely silent in academic research. Early research by Yan (1999) showed that some rural youth attempted to imitate what they perceived as more modern urban lifestyles. More recent work by Chau (2019) takes a spatial approach to rural youth cultural production in northwest China, noting that, despite the lack of dedicated spaces for youth in rural areas, young people nonetheless make use of public spaces such as temples and markets for cultural and social activities. Chau (2019) also highlights how these youth are not passive recipients of urban culture but actively engage with both urban and local forms in creative ways. This points to the importance of recognising the agency of rural youth even under conditions of material constraint.

Among the very limited scholarship on rural youth cultural production, one distinctive phenomenon that has received some academic attention is *Shamate* culture. Emerging in the early 2000s, *Shamate* (a transliteration of the English word "smart") was primarily associated with young rural-to-urban migrant workers, many of whom had limited formal education and were employed in low-paid, precarious jobs (Jiao & Wang, 2023; Leontovich & Kotelnikova, 2021). Known for their brightly dyed, spiked hair, heavy makeup and flamboyant fashion, *Shamate* youth were often perceived by urban and cultural elites as vulgar or even absurd (Huang, 2020; Yuan, 2021). However, what is frequently overlooked is the way these young people creatively used the limited resources available to them to construct a shared sense of identity and community. Their stylistic choices functioned not only as self-expression but also as a form of resistance against dominant urban cultural norms (Feng, 2025). As shown in Li Yifan's 2019 documentary *We Were Smart*, *Shamate* members often referred to their community as "*Shamate* families", reflecting the emotional and social significance of the group in providing visibility and connection (Brossard, 2022).

Though not explicitly grounded in schooling, *Shamate* culture reflects a broader pattern of marginalisation and response that could relate closely to the current and future social positioning of low-achieving students in rural schools. As a group being economically disadvantaged and socially marginalised in urban cities, *Shamate* members sought to form

informal networks and collective cultural practices through stylised performances of identity, which showcased their agency and a desire for visibility.

These expressions of identity can be understood through the lens of subcultural theory developed by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the UK. Influenced by Marxist and structuralist traditions, CCCS scholars viewed youth subcultures, such as the Mods, Teddy Boys and Punks, as symbolic forms of resistance against dominant class structures and cultural hegemony (Blackman, 2005; Johansson & Lalander, 2012). In his seminal work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Hebdige (1979) argued that subcultural style communicates significant difference and group identity. In this light, *Shamate* youth's exaggerated hairstyles and makeup can be seen as intentionally constructed communicative acts that defy normative styles and social expectations.

While such resistance represents a creative response to social exclusion, subcultural strategies cannot resolve the structural issues rooted in subordinate class positions, such as educational disadvantage, unemployment and low wages (Clarke et al., 2016). Moreover, the distinctive stylistic expressions adopted by these young people can also lead to negative consequences, including social labelling and stigma imposed by the dominant society, as was the case with *Shamate* youth. Although subcultural theory is not the primary analytical framework of this study, its insights into youth stylistic expression remain useful for understanding how marginalised young people construct shared identities and assert agency in the face of exclusion.

Importantly, *Shamate* culture extended beyond offline spaces. The proliferation of digital technologies enabled these youth to participate in broader networks of cultural practice. As Zhao (2019) notes, the internet has opened up new avenues for marginalised youth to engage in cultural creation and identity formation. *Shamate* members built online communities, shared content and organised offline meetups, using digital platforms to enhance their visibility and forge supportive peer networks (Brossard, 2022). These digital spaces were crucial for self-presentation, group formation and the cultivation of belonging.

Yet, little research has explored the subjective experiences of this group of young people. Much of the existing literature on *Shamate* culture is based on media analysis and online discourse, rather than empirical studies with *Shamate* individuals themselves. This lack of scholarly attention further highlights the need for research that centres the voices and lived

experience of marginalised youth. The following sections turn to the emerging literature on youth engagement with digital media, with a focus on how Chinese rural and marginalised young people use social media platforms to construct meaning and develop alternative identities in the face of educational and social exclusion.

2.4 Youth and digital media

The increasing integration of digital technologies into everyday life has significantly transformed the social experiences of young people. As a result, youth engagement with social media has become a central concern in recent scholarship. While early studies primarily focused on issues such as access and online risks, more recent research has shifted towards a nuanced understanding of how young people actively use digital platforms to construct identities, negotiate relationships and cultivate communities (Way & Malvini Redden, 2017). This shift reflects a broader rethinking of youth as not merely passive consumers but as active agents navigating complex digital ecosystems.

Adopting a dialectical perspective, this thesis approaches youth as both empowered users and subjects constrained by the technological affordances and socio-technical infrastructures in which their practices unfold (Buckingham, 2008). Youth engagement with digital media, therefore, involves an ongoing negotiation between agency and structure - between the creative possibilities enabled by platforms and the institutional and technological constraints that shape those possibilities. This section reviews literature on youth social media practices, with a focus on how identities and social relations are configured, mediated and transformed within online environments.

2.4.1 Self-presentation and networked publics

Identity is often understood as comprising two interrelated aspects: uniqueness - the qualities that distinguish an individual from others, and connectedness - the relations to social groups based on shared characteristics (Buckingham, 2008). Social media platforms enable young people to express both aspects of identity. This dual process is embedded in what boyd (2014) describes as networked publics: publics that are both constructed by networked technologies and shaped through them, operating as both social spaces and imagined communities.

As spatial environments, social media offers young people a place to gather, interact and express themselves, functioning in ways similar to parks or malls. As social constructs, these platforms help youth imagine themselves as part of broader peer collectives. Through features such as personal profiles, friends lists and public comment functions, young users are not only encouraged to present themselves but also to publicly articulate their social connections (boyd, 2010, 2014). Essentially, the architectural environment of the platforms put the individual at the centre and as the source of interaction which allows the happening of online connection. In this way, both individual and collective identities are simultaneously presented and promoted through self-presentation and the reflexive process of association with social circles (Papacharissi, 2010).

The concept of networked publics also highlights the formation of community norms - the shared understandings of what is acceptable or desirable within a digital space. These norms are shaped not only by content production but also by consumption. As Marwick (2013) notes, young people often anticipate how others will respond to their posts and modify their behaviour accordingly. This aligns with Goffman's (1969) dramaturgical theory of self-presentation, where individuals tailor their behaviour based on their imagined audiences and continuously adjust their performance in response to feedback. While originally applied to face-to-face interactions, this framework has proven effective in analysing online behaviour (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). Similar to offline interactions, individuals purposely present certain qualities of the self to their audience on social media and the feedback one has received can also influence their online production (Hogan, 2010; Marwick & boyd, 2010).

Digital self-presentation is thus both strategic and relational. Users may conform to community norms in order to signal affiliation with particular groups such as a subcultural community. Based on that, Pooley (2010) suggests that users consciously craft "calculated authenticity" (p. 72) - a curated version of the self that feels genuine but is deliberately constructed to meet social expectations. Similarly, Reckwitz (2020) describes the fabrication of "performative authenticity" (p. 99) as a mode of identity performance driven by the motivation to appear unique and authentic. These ideas help to explain how young people negotiate identity and relations to others in a networked environment.

2.4.2 From networked self to algorithmised self

While the early configurations of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram relied heavily on users' existing social networks to shape their experiences, newer short-

video platforms such as *Kuaishou* and *TikTok* introduced a different logic of engagement. One unique feature of short-video platforms is its "*For Your Page*" consisting of algorithmically recommended content based on your previous engagement (Kanthawala et al., 2022). In this model, visibility of your content production is often more about how your content performs in relation to platform metrics.

To account for this specific technological affordance and design, Bhandari and Bimo (2022) propose the concept of the "algorithmised self" in contrast to the "networked self". While the latter emerges through ongoing interaction with peers and social circles, the algorithmised self is constructed primarily through engagement with the user's history of engagement, as mediated through the algorithm. As users encounter iterations of their digital persona through algorithmic feedback, they begin to engage in a reflexive relationship with themselves, rather than with others. Identity, in this context, is shaped not by direct interpersonal connections, but by an iterative and reflexive engagement with self-representations.

The idea of algorithemised self is closely related to Zulli and Zulli's (2020) concept of "imitation publics"- communities formed not through interpersonal connection but through shared participation in content imitation and replication. Platforms such as *TikTok* and *Kuaishou* encourage users to engage in mimetic practices, where content is copied, reinterpreted and repeated. In such environments, collective culture is built not around pre-existing social ties but through participation in trends and performative styles. As Michell (2023) argues, unlike networked publics, *TikTok* publics are not formed through friends lists or comment threads, but through the accumulation of similarly themed videos and constellations of connected content.

Despite these structural conditions, users still retain a degree of agency. This new model of public may underestimate the importance of interpersonal connection. Darvin's (2022) study demonstrated how *TikTok* users resisted such memetic logic through their creative production to perform their unique identity and forge a sense of community among themselves. Also, other studies continue to show that interpersonal connection remains one of the key motivations for people's use of short-video platforms (Lu & Lu, 2019; Vaterlaus & Winter, 2021). Therefore, while algorithmic infrastructures shape visibility and engagement, users still seek to maintain relationships, cultivate peer bonds and build meaningful communities.

2.4.3 Online intimacies and friendship

Research shows that one of the core motivations for social media use among youth is the cultivation of relationship - both maintaining existing friendships and developing new ones (Dobson et al., 2018). The "always-on communication" afforded by networked publics indicates that interaction is no longer restricted to fixed physical spaces and conversations can be continued or moved online. In this sense, youth's online practices have largely mirrored and reproduced their offline social relationships and moreover, it can even complicate their existing friendships and develop new dimensions of social arrangements (Ito et al., 2009). Although social media is often used to connect with friends and acquaintances, some teenagers (especially marginalised teens who feel disenfranchised) also use it to develop connections with strangers and talk to like-minded people to gain social support (Pascoe et al., 2009). Platforms also encourage the articulation of relationships, through features such as friend lists, which can serve as a tool for friendship affirmation (boyd et al., 2009). Moreover, these digital relationships can often have offline implications, influencing social status and popularity in physical life (Metcalfe & Llewellyn, 2019).

The concept of digital intimacy captures the affective dimensions of online connection. As discussed earlier, online self-presentation can also be seen as an act of public display of relational status to the broader networks (Humphreys, 2018). While intimacy has traditionally referred to private, personal relationships, in the context of social media, intimacy itself becomes a public performance. As Petersen et al. (2017) argue, the nature of intimacy has not changed, but the means through which it is performed and made visible have been shaped. What Lambert (2016) describes as public intimacy - when closeness is shared online for wider audiences - disrupts the boundaries between public and private life. These affective performances are shaped by the norms of intimate publics (Hjorth & Arnold, 2013), where shared emotional expression becomes both visible and culturally regulated. In this way, digital intimacy is not just about personal feelings, but deeply intertwined with identity and performance. Acts of closeness are not just expressions of private emotion but are also shaped by the expectations of online publics, contributing to broader modes of self-presentation and group belonging.

This broader context of youth digital engagement sets the stage for the next section, which turns to the role of short-video platforms, particularly *Kuaishou* in the lives of marginalised youth in rural China. As will be explored in the next section, *Kuaishou* has emerged as a

space where young people excluded from dominant educational and cultural narratives creatively construct identities, seek visibility and develop new possibilities for community. These practices unfold within complex dynamics of platform governance and state regulation, shaping their self-presentation and cultural production in the digital space.

2.5 Marginalised youth on short-video platforms

The rise of short-video platforms such as *Kuaishou* in China and *TikTok* internationally has reshaped the digital media landscape, offering new spaces for self-expression, cultural production and visibility. Compared to traditional text-based platforms, these video-sharing platforms emphasise visual and audio content and enable users to share content in creative and interactive ways. *Kuaishou*, one of the most popular social media platforms in China, has been recognised for its distinct user demographic, with a significant number of its users coming from rural and less-privileged backgrounds (Zhai, 2017). Unlike platforms such as *Douyin*, which are dominated by urban middle-class aesthetics, *Kuaishou*'s algorithm is known for promoting content created by ordinary users, providing visibility to groups typically excluded from dominant cultural narratives (Hou, 2021). As such, *Kuaishou* has become a significant site where rural youth engage in digital self-presentation and cultural production. This section reviews the literature on the digital practices of marginalised youth on *Kuaishou*, before drawing comparative insights from international contexts.

2.5.1 *Kuaishou*: a platform to perform rurality?

One line of inquiry into *Kuaishou* concerns the ways rural youth strategically perform rurality on the platform. Several studies have highlighted how rural youth consciously perform "grassroots authenticity" by emphasising traits such as accents, rustic clothing and signs of poverty (Hou & Zhang, 2022; Lin & de Kloet, 2019; Zhou & Liu, 2021). These performances may reflect both an internalisation of and a strategic engagement with urban stereotypes about rural life. On one hand, they reproduce existing hierarchies by reinforcing the rural-urban binary; on the other hand, they can be read as a creative assertion of identity and difference. In contrast, some users deliberately incorporate urban aesthetics into their videos in the hope of aligning themselves with mainstream or aspirational cultural norms (Ting, 2019). Some videos, particularly those presenting an idealised or romanticised version of rural life tend to receive appreciation from urban audiences as such videos are carefully curated to cater to the nostalgic fantasies of urban viewers (Li, 2020). These varied strategies

reflect the diversity of self-presentation among rural youth, but the underlying intention often remains the same: to gain visibility and affirmation in a digital environment that mirrors, yet also reshapes, offline social hierarchies.

It is important to note, however, that such self-presentation is entangled in a broader structure of cultural inequality. Urban audiences and mainstream media in China often categorise rural content as *tuwei* - a term combining "rustic" (tu) with "style" (wei), which connotes vulgarity and backwardness (Y. Chen, 2019). As Liu (2020) argues, this reflects the extension of urban cultural dominance into cyberspace, where value hierarchies are preserved even as access becomes more widespread. This echoes Reckwitz's (2020) concept of the "culturalisation of inequality" (p. 252), where digital platforms claim to democratise cultural visibility but still reproduce class-based value systems. Yet, *tuwei* performances can also be interpreted as subtle forms of resistance, through which rural youth redefine digital space on their own terms and carve out alternative spaces of belonging and community (Gao, 2022; Zhou & Liu, 2021).

2.5.2 Cultural production and censorship

Under the *tuwei* umbrella, distinct digital (sub)cultures have emerged on *Kuaishou*. Two that have received scholarly attention are *hanmai* (Chinese rapping performance) and *shehui ren* ("society people") culture. These forms of digital cultural identities reflect youth agency in response to the political and social-economic environment they are situated in.

Hanmai, a stylised form of rapping often performed in exaggerated, emotionally intense styles, has been used by rural youth to articulate dissatisfaction with structural constraints where there were limited opportunities for social mobility and to imagine alternative futures with less social injustice (Hou, 2020; Xu & Zhang, 2021). Similarly, Li et al.'s (2020) study found that Chinese rural students have developed *shehui ren* ("society people") culture on *Kuaishou*. Historically, the original meaning of the term *shehui ren* refers to individuals who fall outside the traditional socialist work unit systems in urban areas and the commune systems in rural areas (Hou, 2023). It is often associated with precarious workers or jobless people in modern Chinese society. It seems that the emergence of the term on social media is linked to the widespread meme *shehui* (society) meaning someone who is a streetwise gangsta (Hearn, 2021). The term quickly gained popularity, leading many young people, particularly those from rural backgrounds, to generate *shehui ren*-themed images and videos on *Kuaishou*. Yet the term seems to take on a different meaning in the process of creative

production. According to Li et al. (2020), rural students perceived *shehui ren* as individuals with extensive social experiences who could rely on physical strength instead of academic knowledge and credentials to establish themselves in society, akin to criminal gangs. This suggests their alternative strategies for future success and links to the informal school cultures formed by disengaged students as discussed in section 2.2.3. Despite expressing admiration for *shehui ren*, rural youth were hesitant to be associated with a gangster-like image of *shehui ren*, largely because *shehui ren* are usually engaged in occupations considered unstable and precarious. In essence, the implicit connotations of *shehui ren* remain closely related to its original signification, referring to individuals engaged in practices perceived as unconventional and divergent from mainstream society. These studies also suggest the connection between youth's digital practices and their offline everyday lives situated in the broader social and institutional structure, particularly formal schooling, which is the focus of this study.

While short-video platforms open up opportunities for marginalised youth, their creative expression remains constrained by platform governance and state censorship. The Chinese government has increasingly moved from a regulator to a stakeholder of platforms like *Kuaishou* and *Douyin*, promoting political discourses and mainstream narratives that aligned with state ideology (Chen et al., 2021; Zhang, 2020). Videos deemed politically or morally inappropriate including *hanmai* and *shehui ren*-themed content have been removed from the platform and certain accounts of influencers have been deleted (Hou, 2020; Li et al., 2020). This regulatory environment puts limits on digital autonomy and at the same time demonstrates the balance rural youth must navigate between creative self-expression, algorithmic visibility and state-imposed boundaries.

2.5.3 Global comparisons: *TikTok* and marginalised youth

Comparatively, scholarship on *TikTok* also highlights the role of short-video platforms in enabling marginalised youth to develop collective identities and supportive communities. In Western contexts, LGBTQ+ youth have used TikTok to develop supportive online communities, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when in-person spaces were limited (Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021; Skinner, 2022). Another study conducted by Martinez (2022) examined how Black girls used the platform to celebrate joy and everyday life, interpreting this practice as a form of resistance against racism and capitalism. Meanwhile, lower-caste youth in India have used the platform to produce anti-caste content and challenge

dominant hierarchies (Subramanian, 2021; Verma, 2021). Music-based trends, such as the #ThisIsMeChallenge, have enabled young people globally to address experiences of racism, homophobia and ableism through affective and creative practices (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Aguaded, 2022). These examples reflect broader patterns in which marginalised youth use short-video platforms not only to represent themselves but to challenge dominant values and form alternative publics. While the context of these studies differs from the Chinese-based studies, what connects these practices is the use of digital media to create visibility, assert identity and seek recognition in spaces where formal institutions have failed to do so. Existing research on how recognition can be configured and channelled through digital media will be reviewed and discussed in the next chapter.

2.6 Chapter summary

This chapter reviewed key literature relevant to understanding the lived experiences and cultural production of young people in China, with a focus on rural and school-disengaged students and their engagement with digital media.

The first section examined how ability-based grouping and academic labelling shape students' self-perceptions and school experiences. Studies from both Western and Chinese contexts found that low-achieving students often face emotional and relational exclusion, and they are likely to perform disengagement across behavioural, cognitive and emotional dimensions. In the Chinese context, informal tracking and performance-based treatment within schools foster an association between academic ranking and self-worth.

The second section explored resistance and cultural production within schools through drawing parallels and comparisons between western and Chinese contexts. Different theories and approaches to understanding schooling and resistance have been explored. While many Chinese students do not articulate overt critiques of the education system, studies show that they have created alternative value systems and collective identities.

The third section focused on rural youth culture in China, using the case of *Shamate* as an example of cultural formation by marginalised youth. *Shamate* culture demonstrates how young people from rural and working-class background express identity and form communities despite being dismissed as vulgar or low-class by mainstream discourse.

The fourth section reviewed literature on youth and digital media more broadly, highlighting how social media platforms reshape practices of identity, self-presentation and social connection. In particularly, it discusses recent findings on how the new algorithm-based architectures have transformed the forms of participation and engagement.

The final section turned to *Kuaishou* as a unique and significant platform for marginalised youth in China. While *Kuaishou* has emerged as a space for rural youth to perform identity and gain visibility in response to the social conditions they are faced with, youth online practices are also shaped by platform governance and state censorship. Comparisons with the international platform *TikTok* further illustrate how marginalised youth globally use short-video platforms to negotiate identity, community and visibility under different socio-cultural and political regimes.

The reviewed literature highlights the importance of understanding students' informal cultural practices, both within and beyond school. While online practices are believed to be fundamentally affected by and inextricably linked to embodied offline experiences (boyd, 2014), limited research in the Chinese context has examined the connection between school life and digital engagement. Through the lens of recognition theory, this study explores how marginalised youth navigate identity, belonging and interpersonal relationships across educational and digital spaces. The following chapter introduces the theoretical framework and examines how recognition has been applied in both educational and digital media research.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

Chapter overview

The previous chapter reviewed literature on disengaged and low-achieving students in China, highlighting how their marginalisation within the education system shapes their self-perceptions and social relationships. It also examined how some young people used social media to articulate alternative identities and (sub)cultures.

This chapter introduces the theoretical framework that underpins the analysis and interpretation in the study. Axel Honneth's recognition theory offers a conceptual lens for bridging relational marginalisation, self-concept, and student agency. It is used in this study to understand students' experiences as deeply lived and relational processes, shaped by whether and how they feel seen, respected, and valued by others.

The chapter is structured in three parts. First, it outlines the key concepts and arguments of recognition theory. Second, it offers a critical discussion on recognition and power. Finally, it explores how recognition theory has been applied in the fields of education and digital media and considers its relevance for understanding the intersecting offline and online experiences of marginalised youth in China.

3.1 Introduction of recognition theory

Hegel's view on the formation of identity centres on the concept of intersubjectivity. Essentially, this means that we are or perceive ourselves to be constituted in social interaction with others. More specifically, one can only form the understanding of oneself (self-consciousness) in interaction with others when one can view oneself as a social object in the process of producing the same response as the partner of the interaction to the act that one does. According to Butler's (2021) reading of Hegel, "we are each 'outside ourselves', lost to the other, or lost 'in' the other… and that without becoming lost in the other, we stand no chance of knowing ourselves or achieving autonomy" (p. 51). In contrast to the subjectivist model that sees individuals as fully formed and independent subjects with a given set of beliefs, desires and needs, the Hegelian intersubjectivist model highlights the intersubjective nature in the development of individual identities. As Zurn (2015) explains,

(F)or Hegel, the essential features and capacities of human individuals cannot be understood through a solitary subject's introspection, but can only be comprehended and articulated by attending to the intersubjective processes of mutual recognition through which socialisation and individuation occur. (p. 26)

These intersubjective conditions provide the basis for Axel Honneth's development of his theory of recognition, which emphasises interpersonal relationships and offers a way of combining the personal and the public, the emotional and the rational (Fleming, 2016; Thomas, 2012).

The word 'recognition' has multiple meanings in English. It can refer to 1) identifying someone or something; 2) admitting or accepting some acts; and 3) an affirmation of someone's work or acts. The first meaning of "identification" takes everything as its objects; the second meaning of "acknowledging" or "accepting" takes 'normative or evaluative entities' as its objects; and the third meaning only takes persons as its objects (Ikäheimo, 2017, p. 2). The third meaning of recognition is the one used in Honneth's recognition theory referring to "affirming the positive qualities of human individuals or groups" (Honneth, 2002, p. 505).

Drawing on Hegel's philosophy and other theorists' work including George Herbert Mead and Donald Winnicott, Honneth introduced his theory of recognition in his seminal book *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (the English version published in 1995). The overall goal of the book is to propose a formal conception of ethical life that can be used to evaluate the goodness or justness of particular societies. Based on Hegel's idea of three spheres of ethical life, namely family, civil society and the state, Honneth introduced three modes of recognition in each sphere - love (family), rights (civil society) and solidarity (community). These three forms of recognition constitute the social conditions under which individuals are able to develop a positive understanding of themselves. This is due to the intersubjective nature of personal identity:

The only way in which individuals are constituted as persons is by learning to refer to themselves, from the perspective of an approving or encouraging other, as beings with certain positive traits and abilities. The scope of such traits - and hence the extent of one's positive relation-to-self - increases with each new form of recognition that individuals are able to apply to themselves as subjects. (Honneth, 1995, p. 173)

In this sense, achieving recognition is a "vital human need" (Taylor, 1994, p. 26), without which one is unable to form positive attitudes towards themselves and consequently unable to achieve personal autonomy and self-realisation. Corresponding to the three forms of recognition, Honneth introduces three modes of "practical relation-to-oneself": self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. These are posited as essential preconditions for the full development of one's identity, or self-realisation. More specifically, self-confidence is cultivated through experiences of love, self-respect through legal recognition (rights), and self-esteem through experiences of solidarity. For Honneth, societies can be assessed based on the extent to which they provide the necessary conditions for individuals to develop positive self-relations and ultimately achieve self-realisation.

Honneth (1995) emphasises the importance of intersubjective recognition, asserting that

> the reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition, because one can develop a practical relation-to-self only when one has learned to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one's partners in interaction, as their social addressee. (p. 92)

He further introduces three forms of disrespect that correspond to the three modes of recognition - the violation of the body, the denial of rights, and the denigration of ways of life - which can negatively impact individuals' identity development and result in struggles for recognition. Honneth interprets the extension of forms of reciprocal recognition, resulting from individual or group struggles, as the moral development of society. He states, "it is by way of the morally motivated struggles of social groups - their collective attempt to establish, institutionally and culturally, expanded forms of reciprocal recognition - that the normatively directional change of societies proceeds" (Honneth, 1995, p. 93). Thus, recognition not only provides the key to a moral analysis of individual social lives but also forms the basis for explaining practical development at the societal level (Zurn, 2015). When a group of individuals experience unjustified forms of disregard, there is potential for them to challenge the existing recognition order. Successful struggles lead to new forms of intersubjective practices that enable individuals to achieve the autonomy and recognition they deserve.

In summary, Honneth's formal conception of ethical life is grounded in the intersubjective conditions necessary for identity formation. It envisions a normative ideal of society in which individuals receive adequate recognition to support the full development of their identities. In

the following sections, I will first introduce three modes of recognition and their corresponding forms of disrespect, followed by subjects' responses to inadequate forms of recognition. Subsequently, I will address critiques of Honneth's concept of recognition, particularly examining the relationship between recognition and domination. Finally, I will contextualise recognition theory within the scope of my study, focusing on education and social media.

3.1.1 Three modes of recognition

For Honneth, recognition is achieved intersubjectively and it is "more than expression of a cognition, but rather the expressive demonstration of an assessment of worth that accrues to the intelligibility of persons" (Honneth & Margalit, 2001, p. 124). It "refer(s) to the beliefs, attitudes, and actions of others that affirm an individual in an aspect of her self-conception, which is said to allow the individual to realise herself and to live a fulfilling life" (IkäHeimo et al., 2021, p. 2). Drawing upon Hegel's Jena writings, Honneth proposes three modes of recognition: love, rights, and solidarity. Among these, love is identified as the most fundamental and primary mode of recognition, encompassing the recognition of one's own existence. It serves as a prerequisite for the development of other forms of recognition. The second mode, legal recognition, pertains to the perception of oneself as a morally responsible agent, entitled to the same rights and status afforded to others. Finally, solidarity, the third mode of recognition, involves gaining acknowledgment through one's contributions and work.

Love

Love is understood as a fundamental ground to develop other modes of recognition. Honneth (1995) emphasises the importance of love relationship by arguing that "the capacity to trust one's own sense of what one needs and wants is a precondition for self-realisation in any human community" (p. xiv). It represents the first stage of recognition as it is a confirmation of human nature as needy creatures.

Drawing on object relations theory, Honneth develops the idea of love as a primary relationship in the context of child-mother relationships. The child initially is not able to distinguish themselves from the environment and they perceive their relationship with their "mother" (used here to represent primary caregivers) as symbiosis. Gradually they come to realise their mother is an entity in its own right from the external world and the mother also

sees the child as an independent person. This is only possible when there is a strong emotional attachment between them to support this mutual independence. Thus love can be understood as a "form of mutual recognition between intimates whereby one comes to know oneself and to be oneself only in and through a specific form of emotional support from another" (Zurn, 2015, p. 28). Subjects also develop self-trust in the process of expressing their needs without fears of being abandoned. This intersubjective recognition in the mode of love is a necessary condition for developing one's self-confidence, when one consistently receives love and care from persons that one is close to.

It is crucial to distinguish Honneth's use of "self-confidence" within this context from its everyday connotation, where it typically refers to a positive attitude toward one's attributes and particularities. In Honneth's framework, self-confidence pertains to "a very basic sense of the stability and continuity of one's self as a differentiated individual with particular needs and emotions" (Zurn, 2015, p. 31). Unlike the other two forms of recognition, which will be discussed subsequently, the mode of love involves an affirmation of individual uniqueness grounded in reliable care and emotional security. While family and close friends are typically the primary sources of such recognition, in the context of schooling, these forms of care and affirmation can also be provided or withheld by teachers and peers. These interpersonal relationships within the school environment can significantly shape a student's development of self-confidence. This will be explored further in Section 3.3.1 in relation to the experiences of marginalised students in educational settings.

Rights

The second mode of recognition pertains to individuals being acknowledged as legal persons with equal rights. Within this intersubjective process, individuals develop a sense of themselves as morally responsible beings and cultivate a positive self-relational stance called self-respect, defined as "universal respect for the 'freedom of the will of the person'" (Honneth, 1995, p. 112). Self-respect involves "a matter of the general feature that makes them persons at all"(Honneth, 1995, p. 113), meaning that the recognition of legal rights is independent of an individual's specific characteristics and ideally should be ascribed to all human beings as free entities. In experiencing legal recognition, one can perceive oneself as a participant in discursive will-formation, sharing with all other members of the community the qualities necessary for such participation.

In this context, the law serves as a medium for mutual recognition, as self-respect is developed only in and through the legal rights granted to individuals. These legal rights and protections enable individuals to perceive themselves as full and equal members of the community. The recognition of each person as deserving of equal rights, as guaranteed by the law, facilitates the respect of being treated equally alongside other members of society. Unlike self-esteem, which will be discussed later, self-respect is not developed based on ranking or evaluation of a person's qualities or achievements. Rather, as Zurn (2015) explains, respect is directed toward the person as an end in themselves - valued for their inherent moral worth simply by virtue of being a moral agent (p. 35).

The moral development of society is thus manifested in two aspects: first, by expanding the scope of recognition to include new rights claims, such as granting children and young people rights for digital participation; and second, by extending existing rights to broader groups, such as calls for educational inclusion and dignity for vocational or low-achieving students. When individuals are denied rights essential for developing self-respect, such as fair treatment in schools or visibility in public discourse, they are likely to engage in struggles for legal recognition.

Solidarity

The third mode of recognition is solidarity concerning individual's unique characteristics. As Honneth (1995) explains,

> (H)uman subjects always need - over and above the experience of affectionate care and legal recognition a form of social esteem that allows them to relate positively to their concrete traits and abilities. (p. 121)

Different from the universalism of modern legal relations, the third mode of recognition requires the recognition of characteristic differences among human subjects, based on which individuals are able to develop self-esteem. In other words, self-esteem is a matter of sense of what makes one unique and more importantly what makes one unique has to be something valuable. Being esteemed within one's community plays a pivotal role in integrating individuals into mutually supportive social relations (solidarity) and in fostering a positive self-concept as a valued member of the community.

According to Honneth (1995), in pre-modern societies, value-ideas are hierarchically organised, and people's status is measured in terms of social honour, which often results in symmetrical relationships within groups of the same social status but asymmetrical relationships between groups (such as between masters and slaves). In modern societies, self-esteem is no longer associated with a person's legal privilege and the concept of "honour" has been universalised into "dignity" - equal legal rights for each person. Self-esteem is instead gained through graduated evaluation of one's attributes and achievements. As Honneth (1995) suggests, individuals form a sense of self-esteem from being acknowledged for what makes them unique. Recognition, in this sense, is tied to the appreciation of personal distinctiveness - achievements, qualities, or contributions that set a person apart. Therefore, a society that fosters self-esteem must accommodate a plurality of values and forms of achievement, rather than imposing a single, uniform standard of worth. This value pluralism allows individuals to be recognised in ways that affirm their individuality, which is essential for the development of self-esteem.

However, not all accomplishments and abilities are regarded as equally valuable. The worth of individual characteristics is judged according to the extent to which they can contribute to realising societal goals - each society has a set of goals and values to define its identity and it can vary in different times and places (Thompson, 2006, p. 75). However, no matter how the societal goals are defined, a secondary or supplemental cultural interpretation is always needed to offer practical and concrete criteria that can be applied in the sphere of recognition. Accordingly, the social worth of particular traits and abilities is fundamentally dependent on the dominant interpretations of societal goals in each historical case (Honneth, 1995, p. 126). But this kind of secondary interpretation can only be understood as an ongoing cultural conflict as what accomplishments and ways of life are viewed as valuable depends on which social group succeeds in making their voice heard. Therefore, Honneth (1995) argues that

> in modern societies, relations of social esteem are subject to a permanent struggle, in which different groups attempt, by means of symbolic force and with reference to general goals, to raise the value of the abilities associated with their way of life. (p. 127)

Based on this, Thomas (2012) suggests that solidarity can be more easily achieved within groups in the joint pursuit of socially shared goals, but the bigger challenge is to extend this solidarity to a wider community based on mutual recognition. Since the social conditions for

esteem are decided by what counts as meaningful contributions to society, Honneth claims that a good society should have an open and pluralistic evaluative system in which everyone has the opportunity to earn their esteem. In the context of education, academic achievement often becomes the primary standard by which students are valued, shaping both their opportunities and social status. As will be explored in Chapter 5, the ways in which esteem is distributed within the education system play a central role in shaping students' sense of worth and their visions of what constitutes a good life and desirable future.

In summary, Honneth's theory of recognition provides an account of structural interconnection between three levels of individual self-relations (self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem) and corresponding forms of recognition (love, rights, and social esteem), with each anchored in distinct spheres of social life. Love affirms the individual's particularity through emotional support; respect (right) recognises the individual's universality through the granting of equal rights; and social esteem (solidarity) values the individual's uniqueness through appreciation of their specific contributions. These intersubjective forms of recognition are essential for the full development of one's identity and self-realisation. As Zurn (2015) explains, this structural interconnection also provides a foundation for understanding social change by explicating the motivations behind struggles for expanded recognition and the normative claims raised in these collective efforts (p. 93). Ideally, individuals should experience recognition across all three levels, but in reality, many encounter forms of disrespect that hinder their identity formation. These forms of disrespect, and their implications, will be explored in the following section.

3.1.2 Disrespect

Experiencing forms of disrespect can adversely affect individuals by undermining their positive intersubjective experiences. Honneth (1995) asserts that such disrespectful experiences have significant consequences, noting that:

> Because the normative self-image of each and every individual human being…is dependent on the possibility of being continually backed up by others, the experience of being disrespected carries with it the danger of an injury that can bring the identity of the person as a whole to the point of collapse. (p. 131-132)

Similarly, Taylor (1994) echoes Honneth's view on disrespect:

> The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (p. 25)

The quotations above illustrate the detrimental impact of experiencing disrespect on the development of one's identity. Such experiences contribute to a compromised self-identity and undermine an individual's capacity to achieve an ethical life (Huttunen, 2007). The most severe consequence of a complete absence of recognition is the "despairing expression: 'I am nothing,' in the sense of 'I have no personal identity - there is nothing that is me'" (Heidegren, 2002, p. 436). Based on the three modes of recognition, Honneth identifies three corresponding forms of disrespect (see Table 1): the violation of the body, the denial of rights, and the denigration of ways of life.

Table 1 Three Modes of Recognition: adapted from Honneth (1995, p. 129)

Modes of recognition	Emotional support	Cognitive support	Social esteem
Dimension of personality	needs and emotions	moral responsibility	traits and abilities
Forms of recognition	primary relationships (love, friendship)	legal relations (rights)	community of value (solidarity)
Developmental potential	——	generalization, de-formalization	individualization, equalization
Practical relation-to-self	basic self-confidence	self-respect	self-esteem
Forms of disrespect	abuse and rape	denial of rights, exclusion	denigration, insult
Threatened component of personality	physical integrity	social integrity	'honour', dignity

The first form of disrespect - the threat to physical integrity involves physical abuse that destroys one's self-confidence. Other people's control of one's body against his or her free will has more destructive effects on the person's relation-to-self than other forms of disrespect. No matter what forms of the violation of the body are involved - it can be suffering from torture, rape or other, one's feelings of being in control of one's body is taken away, which results in "a dramatic breakdown in one's trust in the reliability of the social world and hence by a collapse in one's own basic self-confidence" (Honneth, 1995, p. 133). Any attempts to justify the act of such physical abuse are not helpful to prevent individuals from feeling deprived of a stable reality and self-trust.

Secondly, being excluded from possessing legal rights in the community where one lives affects one's moral self-respect, thus damaging one's social integrity (Honneth, 1995). When subjects are denied certain rights that they expect to get, they fail to perceive themselves as fully-fledged members of the community and they are not recognised as equal partners to other members. It is a violation of the equal treatment one deserves in a moral society, which will result in feelings of unfairness and injustice.

The third form of disrespect is to downgrade certain forms of life as inferior. If the hierarchy of values downgrades some forms of life as inferior, the result of this evaluative degradation is that people involved would be unable to link their ways of life as positive and significant in their community, which eventually leads to a loss of self-esteem. As a result, they fail to obtain the "social approval of a form of self-realisation that he or she had to discover, despite all hindrances, with the encouragement of group solidarity" (Honneth, 1995, p. 134). One may even feel ashamed in the process of interaction when their actions are being rejected or viewed as of low social value. For minority groups or individuals who have non-dominant ways of living and face widespread social denigration, seeking affirmation within communities that share similar characteristics and values may become a key means of attaining recognition (Zurn, 2015). In the context of this study, students marginalised within the educational system may come to develop collective identities that diverge from dominant academic norms and find recognition within peer groups that share similar experiences. However, this raises a critical question: is recognition within a subcultural peer group sufficient for the development of healthy self-esteem. This is one of the key questions that this study aims to address and will be discussed in Chapter 8.

As Honneth (1997) argues, "the core of moral injuries is located in the refusal of recognition" (p. 27). Negative emotional suffering is consistently associated with the deprivation of the intersubjective recognition essential for developing a healthy self-relation. Nevertheless, Honneth (2007a) observes that "subjects only experience disrespect in what they can grasp as violations of the normative claims they have come to know in their socialisation as justified implications of established principles of recognition" (p. xii). This suggests that individuals may not perceive certain treatments as disrespectful if they are convinced by the prevailing social order that such treatment is justified. In such cases, recognition can shift from being a moral concept to an ideological one, potentially serving as a tool for domination. The relationship between recognition and domination will be further explored in section 3.2.

3.1.3 Emotional sufferings and struggles for recognition

Honneth (1995) argues that negative emotional reactions such as shame and anger function as an indicator for the subject that certain forms of recognition have been withdrawn from them, and these hurtful feelings resulting from the social disrespect can provide affective motivational basis for the subject's struggles for recognition. This is because only by regaining that possibility of active action can their negative emotions be eliminated. Accordingly, Honneth (1995) establishes the connection between moral disrespect and social struggle - "motives for social resistance and rebellion are formed in the context of moral experiences stemming from the violation of deeply rooted expectations regarding recognition" (p. 163). It means that individuals' experiences of disrespect through hurtful feelings can potentially motivate collective resistance. In short, negative moral emotions here play a dual role - "epistemologically, they serve as defeasible evidence of a failure of recognition and thus the presence of a normative reason for change, and motivationally they move one to seek it" (Kauppinen, 2002, p. 488).

However, to make social resistance or movement happen, the individual experience of being disrespected has to be read as typical for an entire group. It means that individuals need to be aware that their negative feelings are caused by unjust social conditions instead of their personal inadequacy and there are a group of people who share similar experiences as they do. Furthermore, "there must be a semantic bridge between the impersonal aspirations of a social movement and their participants' private experiences of injury, a bridge that is sturdy enough to enable the development of collective identity" (Honneth, 1995, p. 163). What Honneth highlights here is the importance of an intersubjective framework of interpretation in

bridging personal feelings of injury and the development of group identities for collective resistance. In this sense, collective resistance is grounded in a subcultural horizon of interpretations that point to new possibilities for expanding relations of recognition. In creating a shared understanding within subgroups in terms of the social conditions and subjects' experiences of injustice, social groups are able to form collective aims for a struggle for recognition.

As previously discussed, each form of recognition corresponds to a distinct aspect of the subject's self-relation. Systematic experiences of disrespect, by obstructing intersubjective recognition, undermine the development and maintenance of a stable sense of self. Struggles for new forms of recognition can thus be understood as processes through which individuals or groups seek to articulate identities that are not acknowledged within existing normative frameworks. If such struggles for new relations of recognition have been successful, individuals will be able to overcome the inhibitions on their actions resulting from passive moral emotion, thereby they are able to view themselves as worthy of esteem. Honneth (1995) conceives such struggle for recognition as "a historical process of moral progress" (p. 168), aimed at the "realisation of undistorted forms of recognition" (p. 170). As he writes, "it is by way of the morally motivated struggles of social groups - their collective attempt to establish, institutionally and culturally, expanded forms of reciprocal recognition - that the normatively directional change of societies proceeds" (Honneth, 1995, p. 93). In this context, my study examines how marginalised youth, through shared experiences of exclusion, construct collective identities and seek new forms of mutual recognition as a means of restoring or developing healthy self-relations.

3.2 Critical discussion: recognition and power

The previous sections have outlined the fundamental and prominent arguments of recognition theory proposed by Honneth. As a topic that occupies a central role in social and political philosophy debates, it has also received some critiques. The significant critique addressed in this section pertains to the perceived failure for Honneth to offer a systematic understanding of power, specifically how social structures influence individual experiences within intersubjective interactions. This critique involves examining the concept of recognition as potentially ideological. In the following part, I will discuss this critique and review Honneth's responses, and also consider its relevance to the context of this study.

It is evident that two parties are essential for the successful act of recognition: the recogniser and the recognised (Zurn, 2015). The recogniser must express positive attitudes through actions, words, nonverbal gestures, or other forms of communication as a genuine response to the normative characteristics of the recognised individual. Conversely, the recognised individual must interpret these expressions as positive affirmations of the attributes in question, thereby fostering a positive relation-to-self. In addition to these two primary actors, Ikäheimo (2015) introduced a third party that mediates the act of recognition which can be "an individual, a collective, or norms, values or representations prevailing in the social environment" (p. 27). In this sense, the second and third modes of recognition proposed by Honneth are particularly relevant when considering how law serves as a medium for granting rights and how the evaluative system within a community determines the social esteem an individual can receive. Building on this, Ikäheimo (2015, 2017) introduced additional dimensions to the categorisation of recognition. He distinguished between vertical and horizontal recognition - vertical recognition occurs between individuals and institutions, while horizontal recognition occurs between individuals. Honneth's focus is primarily on horizontal recognition.

Ikäheimo (2015, 2017) further divided vertical recognition into "upwards" and "downwards" categories, referring respectively to individuals recognising social institutions and institutions recognising individuals. Additionally, he proposed two forms of horizontal recognition: normatively mediated and purely intersubjective recognition. Normatively mediated recognition is based on norms that stipulate rights or entitlements; individuals who are granted such rights or entitlements receive recognition accordingly. In contrast, purely intersubjective recognition is a response to individuals regardless of their status or roles, recognising them simply as individuals. Arguably, there is not much difference between upwards-directed recognition (vertical) and normatively mediated recognition (horizontal). Recognising an institution often entails accepting its rules and norms, which subsequently influence how individuals recognise each other at the horizontal level. In other words, "in recognizing someone as X, one is also acknowledging or upholding the normative framework that makes recognition as X possible" (Hirvonen, 2022, p. 244). In this sense, recognition is often granted to people who conform to the dominant normative framework in the society. So individuals are more likely to gain recognition when their actions and values align with the prevailing culture and social norms. This perspective thus raises the question regarding the

potential of recognition being used as a tool to enforce conformity to dominant norms and social orders in the process of normatively mediated recognition.

Several scholars have explored the ambivalence of recognition, acknowledging its dual dimensions of "becoming part of a socially established order and gaining a certain degree of freedom" (Honneth, 2021, p. 24). "Optimistic" theorists of recognition, such as Honneth, view reciprocal or full forms of recognition as constituting the ideal for evaluating ethical lives, positing that experiences of disrespect can eventually be overcome. However, employing recognition as an ideal goal raises the questions regarding its potential dominating or ideological forms. As Allen (2008) argues, "a state of human intersubjectivity that is completely free of power relations and is structured entirely by mutual recognition is an illusion, and a pernicious one at that" (p. 91). It means that the role of recognition in human life may not be unambiguously positive, as the "recognisability" of subjects depends on social norms that reflect the power structures of society (Ikäheimo, 2017, p. 578). This suggests that individuals' subjection to authorities and social norms mirrors upward vertical recognition, where individuals who acknowledge social institutions and the roles assigned to them would then receive recognition from these institutions in return. Consequently, recognition can play "the ideological role of disguising and legitimating certain operations of power" (Van den Brink & Owen, 2007, p. 22). It also contains the dangers of being formed against one's will or compelling subjects to adhere to the rules of a normative order that moulds subjects in an unjust fashion (Hirvonen & Koskinen, 2022).

Allen (2010) provides an example of gender subordination, demonstrating how a girl who receives love and recognition alongside subordinating gender ideology is unable to produce any form of resistance. To receive recognition, she must capitulate to the authoritative power of her parents, who embody the normative demands of society. In other words, she must accept and internalise these power relations before she has developed the autonomy and capabilities to critically analyse their legitimacy. In an educational context, if a student wishes to be recognised as a "good student", they must conform to the predefined notion of "good student". Thus, it can be argued that "forms of recognition may contribute to the reproduction of relations of domination by encouraging individuals to subject themselves to social demands in order to receive the recognition that they crave" (Allen, 2010, p. 28). From this perspective, recognition can be viewed as a means of domination if the fundamental

desire for recognition is exploited by dominant powers, offering it to individuals only if they accept the dominant ideology and subordinating status.

In addition, power relations can also play a significant role in forms of disrespect. Giles (2017) asserts that disrespect can occur when the power within intersubjective relations is not reversible or changeable. This can take place because some individuals lack the power to co-determine the evaluative terms of their social status, and they may not possess the "recognisable" attributes necessary for receiving recognition. Consequently, they experience forms of disrespect. This group of people "may come to involve an internalised sense of their powerlessness, inferiority, and 'appropriate' place in the margins of society" (Van den Brink & Owen, 2007, p. 2). For example, students typically do not have the power to define what constitutes a "good student", as these norms are pre-established. As a result, students who do not exhibit the desired characteristics are less likely to be recognised and are thus more likely to be marginalised within the school system.

According to Ikäheimo's (2017's) reading of Butler, "the desire for recognition essential to human being predetermines the human individual's more or less unreflective acceptance… or her subjection under 'power', binding her psychologically to her own submission to the normative order of the society" (p. 580). In other words, this desire for recognition can lead individuals to subject themselves to existing power structures and dominant norms to seek validation and acceptance. However, such conformity can "produce a diminishment of autonomy and reproduce forms of social domination" (Petherbridge, 2013, p. 192). This is particularly relevant to the Chinese educational context. As discussed in the previous chapter, students often internalise dominant narratives that frame academic success as the primary route to social mobility and a promising future. As a result, many students - despite being marginalised within the institutional structure - showed limited resistance or critical awareness of the ways in which the schooling system contributes to their own exclusion.

Honneth has responded to such critique in his later writings. First, he admitted that recognition can be perceived as a conformist ideology when recognition is given to individuals who conform to the established societal system and behavioural expectations. It can thus result in individuals' subordination to the dominant structure by encouraging a positive self-image. He states,

> Social recognition can always also operate as a conformist ideology, for the continuous repetition of identical forms of recognition can create a feeling of self-worth that provides the motivational resources for forms of voluntary subordination, without employing methods of repression. (Honneth, 2012, p. 77)

Honneth (2012) further discusses the institutionalised forms of recognition, asserting that "institutions can be understood as embodiments of the specific form of recognition that subjects accord each other on the basis of specific evaluative qualities" (p. 84). Individuals within an institution who "have been socialised successfully into the culture of that lifeworld take these values to be objective givens of their social environment" (p. 83). Patterns of recognition within institutions are thus established through rules and practices and possess an ideological character, encouraging individuals to subordinate themselves to the established rules and expectations. In this process, institutions "possess the 'regulative' ability to engender modes of behaviour by promising the advantage of an increase in self-esteem and public affirmation" (p. 90).

However, Honneth (2012) also outlines certain preconditions for the actualisation of ideological recognition. For ideological forms of recognition to effectively motivate all individuals to behave in ways that align with the existing dominant order, these forms must provide opportunities for individuals to develop a positive relation-to-self, thus encouraging them to adopt specific tasks willingly. He further argues that "systems of beliefs in which specific groups or persons are denied worth…cannot represent ideological forms of recognition, because they usually injure the self-image of their addressees" (Honneth, 2012, p. 86). In the context of schooling, while students may be motivated to conform to school norms and expectations in the hope of receiving recognition, the system inherently privileges certain attributes (such as academic performance) over others. As a result, not all students are equally positioned to succeed. Those who are labelled as low-achieving may receive little respect or even face forms of disrespect tied to their underperformance. As such, the school context may fail to meet the conditions necessary for ideological recognition, since the recognition offered by the school system is unequally distributed, undermining the development of a positive self-concept for some students. This exclusion can, in turn, generate struggles for recognition among those who are marginalised by the dominant educational norms.

In cases where the subjects of ideological recognition have willingly accepted the value standards without realising its problematic oppression upon them, it can be difficult to distinguish ideological recognition from normative recognition. Honneth's judgement is that it can be defined as ideological recognition "when there is a substantial gap between the evaluative acknowledgement or promise that the act centres upon, and the institutional and material conditions necessary for the fulfilment of that acknowledgement or promise" (Zurn, 2015, p. 97). For instance, women as housewives have often received praise for their hard work, being recognised as "good" wives or mothers. However, this promised esteem is not realised in the actual material division of labour; thus, full reciprocal esteem is never achieved. Compared to justified positive recognition, ideological forms of recognition are only demonstrated at a symbolic level and lack material responses. Additionally, Honneth argues that there is a dyadic relationship in the process of normative recognition - while one grants recognition to the other, the recogniser's own freedom is limited through granting freedom or authority to the recognised. For normative recognition, "it demands from the giver a self-constraint with regard to how to act or behave in the future, where this is an expression of the value attributed to the other; if sufficient self-limitation of one's freedom does not follow, we can speak of recognition becoming a form of ideology" (Honneth, 2021, p. 27). It seems that, according to Honneth, recognition can only be defined as such when subjects are given the freedom to interpret and apply norms in interaction; while for the form of ideological recognition, individuals are merely ascribed a fixed identity by an institutional act without having any say in the matter.

Another question related to the dynamics between recognition and power concerns two models of recognition. Does recognition attribute moral status to subjects, or is it people's response to a person who already has moral status? The attributive model refers to the act of recognition as attribution, through which a subject is ascribed a new and positive quality (the positive qualities possessed by the subject are produced by the act of recognition). In contrast, the perception model refers to the act of recognition as a perception, by being aware of the already present status possessed by the subject (the positive qualities possessed by the subject are reproduced in a meaningful way) (Honneth, 2007b, p. 331). Honneth (2002) prefers the perception model, as he states:

> In our recognitional attitudes, we respond appropriately to evaluative qualities that, by
> the standards of our lifeworld, human subjects already possess but are actually

available to them only once they can identify with them as a result of experiencing the recognition of these qualities. (p. 510)

By viewing recognition as the perception model, it acknowledges an individual's attributes that they already possess. Consequently, it seems to avoid the problem of dominance wherein individuals adopt behaviours that conform to the dominant order (Petherbridge, 2013). However, it can also be argued that those pre-existing features can be constituted in the relations of power in the process of subject formation.

The discussion above has been defined by Stahl (2021) as a "simple ambivalence claim" (p. 165). Building upon this, Stahl further proposed the concept of a radical ambivalence claim. In his interpretation of Hegel, subjects are not merely subjected to community-determined norms. If subjects had no influence over these norms - if norms and evaluations were entirely imposed by others - they would be entirely vulnerable to others' judgments, rendering their assigned social status meaningless. In fact, all desirable forms of recognition, when granted, confer a social status that enables individuals to challenge and critically engage with the norms and structures through which they are recognised. In this way, subjects engage in an immanent critique of the dominant form of recognition by having the right to demand justifications and by using justificatory standards to assess the validity of the terms in which they are being recognised. Domination occurs only when it is one-sided, meaning that others assign recognition according to whatever terms they wish without restriction.

According to Stahl (2021), Butler's response to the Hegelian argument regarding immanent critique is that subjects' abilities to question and critique the terms of their recognition are undermined and limited to a critique *within* ideology (p. 173). Consequently, subjects remain vulnerable to the power of others, as "the power it refers to is rooted not in the way others can arbitrarily determine the meaning of the norms in question, but in the way in which subjects' capacities to react to such determination are formed and constituted" (Stahl, 2021, p. 172). This suggests that power relations limit subjects' critical capacities, implying that the existence of ideological recognition is due to subjects' lack of critical capacities to question or challenge others' interpretations of the normative standards of recognition in their community. Based on this, Stahl (2021) proposed the idea of constitutive domination, asserting that dependence on norms established by others "forms a limit to the subject's capacities to contest the norms regulating its recognisability, thus making it vulnerable to the arbitrary power of others" (p. 177). Stahl's argument emphasises how the power relations can

undermine one's critical awareness to challenge the existing recognition order. This offers a nuanced understanding of how domination operates, which is particularly useful for analysing students' capacity or lack thereof to critically engage with the normative structures that shape the interpersonal recognition available to them.

The above discussion on power relations and ideological recognition raises several critical questions for this study to consider. These include: How do students respond to the dominant recognition order? In what ways are they defined by the education system, and how does this affect their capacity for critical reflection? How do they retain and exercise agency in interactions with others who may choose to withhold recognition, and how do they engage in struggles for recognition when they fail to develop healthy self-relations in certain structures? These questions will be explored through the empirical findings and discussion in Chapters 5 to 8. Before turning to the application of recognition theory in this study, the following sections review existing literature to examine how the theory has been employed in educational and digital contexts, and to explore its potential relevance for the current research.

3.3 Applying recognition theory: educational and digital contexts

3.3.1 Recognition theory in education

Except in the context of the primary relationship of love and care, Honneth does not explicitly engage with the category of children in his theory, instead often presenting them as adults in waiting (Thomas, 2012). However, Thomas (2012) argues that children should be recognised not only as recipients of love and care but also as givers of it. He suggests that children are both right-bearers and right-respecters, and potential - if not actual - members of a community of solidarity based on shared values and reciprocal esteem (p. 458). While Thomas uses the term "children", his argument is equally relevant to young people more broadly. Given that youth are also morally responsible individuals with talents and capacities to contribute to society in diverse ways, they too are deserving of esteem alongside adults. Therefore, it is both appropriate and valuable to apply recognition theory to understand the personal and social development of young people (Graham et al., 2016).

So far, the theory of recognition has not yet been widely applied in research on children and young people. Only a very limited number of studies have used it on children's participation in social and political life or disadvantaged children and youth. Graham and Fitzgerald (2010)

reframed the concept of "participation" as children's entitlement to recognition. This implies that "participation" is not merely a process of listening to children's voices on certain topics and engaging them in discussion and decision-making; it can also provide opportunities for children to explore their understandings of themselves and their positions in society, through which they could develop self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. Another line of research has used recognition theory to understand the lived experiences of disadvantaged or vulnerable children and youth, such as unaccompanied children and youth (Kauhanen & Kaukko, 2020; Korkiamäki & Gilligan, 2020), children in care (Warming, 2015), and vulnerable young people with chronic exposure to adversity from an early age (Munford & Sanders, 2020). These studies have shown that some children's demands for recognition were not satisfied, which negatively impacted their self-understanding.

Although one may find a close connection between Honneth's recognition theory and certain philosophies of education, as both share similar interests in human development and flourishing (Koskinen, 2018), only a few studies so far have applied this theory within the field of education. While schools may not fall neatly into any one of Honneth's three spheres of recognition (family, civil society, and community), they can be seen as spaces that intersect with all three. Schools are key sites of self-formation, where students develop their identities through intersubjective relationships and achieve self-realisation, paralleling the workplace for adults (Moensted, 2022). Similarly, Jeznik (2015) has highlighted the importance of building a heterogeneous and inclusive school environment for the development of students' identities:

> The ethical level of recognition not only signifies a fear of a merely distanced allowing for a different opinion (passive tolerance) or a clear compassion with the individual's or group's fortune (pity), but also awareness of the fact that diversity is a value in the contemporary school and a basic foundation of an adequate support for identity development within a school community. (p. 39)

However, in practice, the school system often tends to homogenise students, marginalising those who do not conform to dominant norms and failing to recognise each individual's unique qualities. Bates (2019) argues that self-esteem is difficult to realise in schools because it does not involve "the empirical application of general, intuitively known norms but rather the graduated appraisal of concrete traits and abilities" (Honneth, 1995, p. 113). Instead, the school education system seems to have already "established a normative view of the

'exemplary pupil'" (Bates, 2019, p. 701). The technicist activities prioritised by schools, such as setting academic goals and tracking performance through standardised assessments, tend to objectify students by attempting to fit everyone into a standardised mould, rather than valuing individuals as persons with unique traits and abilities.

As Murphy (2010) suggests, the concept of recognition offers a valuable lens for exploring students' lived experiences in school, particularly those with low educational attainment. As discussed in the previous chapter, research has highlighted the negative interpersonal experiences of disengaged and low-achieving students in their relationships with teachers. In Moensted's (2022) study, a group of school-disengaged students reported feeling unworthy of care and attention (love), experiencing unjust treatment or punishment (rights), and perceiving their identities and contributions as undervalued and unsupported (self-esteem). Similarly, Hargreaves et al. (2024) investigated the experiences of lower-attaining primary school children in the UK and found that these students frequently felt excluded, othered, or invisible in their interactions with both peers and teachers. They often viewed themselves as less worthy and of lower status compared to their high-performing peers. In the same study, English and mathematics were identified as the most highly valued subjects, with their associated skills receiving greater recognition. The institutional emphasis on specific academic achievements and standardised measures of success tends to marginalise students who do not meet these criteria, intensifying feelings of inadequacy and exclusion. These findings suggest that schools - rather than serving as inclusive spaces of social recognition - can, in practice, become sites where recognition is unevenly distributed, limiting some students' opportunities for self-realisation.

While some researchers have highlighted the importance of peer relationships and friendship at school (Korkiamäki, 2016; Moensted, 2022), another primary interpersonal relationship at school is between teachers and students. When considering power relations, a tension exists between the ideal of mutuality and the reality of unequal social relationships. In the school setting, the power dynamics between teachers and students are evident (Altmeyer, 2018). Moensted (2022) found that a group of disadvantaged students received unjust treatment due to the teachers' abuse of power and control, indicating an asymmetrical relationship between the two parties engaged in the process of recognition. If sufficient recognition can only be achieved when power within the intersubjective relations is reversible and changeable (Giles, 2017), it can be difficult to occur in teacher-student interactions. The earlier discussions on

power and domination can thus be useful in analysing students' agency and self-formation in their intersubjective relationships with teachers.

As mentioned earlier, if the school education system has already "established a normative view of the 'exemplary pupil'" (Bates, 2019, p. 701), it implies that only students who conform to the normative definition of a "good student" will be granted recognition. Rosa (2013) claimed that the classroom is "a permanent field of struggle for the valuation of capabilities, efforts and achievements" (p. 100), where students desire to be liked for who they are and to be treated equally as their peers. Students' desire for recognition becomes their motivational basis to strive to be among those "good students" in order to be valued at school. Nevertheless, the competitive nature of the education system - stemming largely from its function of sorting and selecting (Brown et al., 1997) - means that not everyone can succeed academically, and many students must "fail". This suggests that schools may not provide a pluralistic evaluative system in which everyone has the opportunity to earn esteem. If this is the case, it is essential to explore students' responses to the lack of recognition or even disrespect that they may experience at school - whether and to what extent they are able to develop critical capabilities to evaluate the recognition order and in which ways students who "fail" in the school system will struggle for recognition.

Recognition theory therefore offers a valuable framework for understanding students' interpersonal experiences within the school environment, particularly those of marginalised students who may be denied adequate recognition. This theoretical lens will be used to examine the lived experiences of a group of "underachieving" students in this study. The following section shifts focus to mediated recognition - forms of recognition achieved through digital media platforms.

3.3.2 Mediated recognition

Much of the discussion around recognition theory has been conducted in the context of face-to-face interactions. However, struggles for recognition can - and in many cases have been mediated (Maia, 2014). Therefore, research on the process of mediation through media is needed in order to expand the concept of intersubjectivities in the recognition theory. In particular, as digital technologies become increasingly embedded in everyday life, understanding how individuals grant recognition to each other in online interactions and how people use digital media to seek or struggle for recognition remains an important yet under-researched area.

Compared to many offline environments, digital platforms seem to provide more opportunities for individuals to express themselves. In fact, social media can be viewed as a suitable place for seeking recognition (Ceilutka, 2022). It encourages every aspect of recognition - facilitates social interaction and develops relationships with others (love); offers opportunities for everyone to express their voices (rights) and present their personal achievements (self-esteem). However, the autonomy and freedom facilitated by digital media are also accompanied by limitations and dependencies. While Honneth (in Honneth & Margalit, 2001) introduces the notion of "expressive gestures of recognition" in offline interpersonal contexts, it can be conceptually extended to the context of social media, where acts such as liking and sharing can be interpreted as measurable forms of recognition. These visible metrics - such as the number of likes or followers - not only allow for individual comparison but also foster competition for recognition. Consequently, the internet has become a "recognition market" (Baroncelli & Freitas, 2011) where individuals can either choose to present the most recognition-worthy aspects of their lives or establish their own value system driven by exceptionalism (Ceilutka, 2022). Yet no matter which strategy individual users choose, the social practices mediated by the platforms are partially governed via the algorithms of the techno-economic architecture, which means they are not value-free or open-ended. In this sense, the individual quest for recognition via digital media also involves dependence on the techno-economic system of the platform. Media institutions also play a role in legitimising certain forms of recognition by determining the content value and normalising desirable formats of self-realisation (Campanella, 2024; Jansson, 2015). In other words, users' acts of posting and sharing are regulated by the working logics of the platforms associated with quantification and algorithms. Campanella (2024) defined this as "datafied recognition" and argued that it is a weak form of recognition because it is gained through the individual committing to a moral model that assigns value to certain acts and identities while the traditionally emancipatory struggles for recognition are marked by the marginalised group's pursuit for equal rights and freedom. Despite the potential impact of the working logics of the platform, the differentiation and connectivity of digital media can also facilitate individuals' struggle for affirmational recognition by enabling them to find appropriate subcultural groups and communities and express various aspects of their personalities and ways of living (Pedersen, 2022).

As discussed, the existing research suggests that social media may offer new avenues for young people to seek recognition through the construction of online identities and the

formation of digital connections. However, there remains a lack of empirical studies and theoretical frameworks that extend recognition theory into the digital realm. By examining students' digital practices on social media, this study aims to theorise their online engagement through the lens of interpersonal recognition, thereby contributing to the expansion of recognition theory within the context of digital media.

3.4 Chapter summary

This chapter introduces the key concepts and arguments of intersubjective recognition theory and critically examines its relationship to power and domination. It also contextualises the theory within the educational and digital contexts that form the focus of this study. Recognition theory establishes the connection between the social origins of individual experiences of injustice and disrespect and the normative goals of developing solidarity among marginalised groups. Since self-realisation can only be fully achieved within a social context that offers adequate and positive forms of intersubjective recognition, it is essential to examine students' experiences in school environments where a dominant recognition order often exists. Furthermore, by investigating students' digital engagement in relation to their schooling experiences, the theory enables an analysis of how young people navigate different social environments in their pursuit of recognition and self-realisation. This process involves continuous interaction with others, including teachers and peers, as students seek validation across both traditional and digitally mediated spaces.

By centring students' experiences and voices, this study explores how students develop self-understanding through intersubjective interactions, how they perceive (dis)respect within the existing system(s), and how they exercise agency in creating new possibilities for recognition. To foreground students' own feelings and lived experiences, this study adopts an ethnographic approach to examine their practices across both school and digital spaces. The following chapter outlines the methodology and methods used for data collection.

Chapter 4 Methodology

Chapter overview

This chapter outlines the methodology and methods used in this study to address the research questions. I begin by discussing the ethnographic approach I adopted both in school and online and why it is well suited to the aims of my research. I then describe the research field site, how I gained access through a gatekeeper, and how I recruited participants. After that, I focus on the two main methods I used: participant observation and interviews. I then reflect on my positionality and the dual roles I played as both a substitute teacher and a researcher and how I navigated field relations. The next section focuses on ethical considerations, especially those related to researching with children and young people, the use of online data, and ethical dilemmas I encountered during fieldwork. Following this, I discuss the emotional labour involved in the research, which I argue can serve as a valuable methodological lens for understanding relational concepts. I then outline the analytical approach I used to interpret the data, before concluding the chapter. This chapter also incorporates excerpts from fieldnotes to help describe the field site and to support reflections on the methodological choices made in the study.

These methodological choices were made to capture the complexities of young people's experiences across school and digital spaces. They also aim to position students not merely as research subjects but as active meaning-makers of their social world. This approach supports the study's aim to explore students' lived experiences through the lens of recognition theory, by examining how interpersonal relationships unfold in their everyday lives and shape their sense of self.

4.1 Ethnographic research

This study adopts an integrated ethnographic approach that combines both offline and online methods to explore the lived experiences of rural youth in contemporary China. This approach was chosen in order to address research questions that examine two key social contexts in young people's lives - schooling and digital engagement. More broadly, the decision to connect these two spaces reflects the increasingly intertwined nature of the online and offline worlds in the everyday experiences of young people. In what follows, I first outline the rationale for employing ethnography to study an educational setting, before

turning to a discussion of the interconnectedness between online and offline worlds and the use of digital ethnography in this study.

4.1.1 Ethnography in educational settings

Ethnography is often seen as the study of culture that seeks to understand different ways of living from the perspective of those being studied (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Spradley, 1980). It is "the study of people in their own time and space, in their own everyday lives" (Burawoy, 1991, p. 2). A key feature of ethnography is the study of people's behaviours in natural settings, rather than under conditions created by the researcher (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). This methodological commitment is grounded in the belief that human behaviour is significantly shaped by the contexts in which it occurs (Wilson, 1977). Removing individuals from their naturalistic settings can obscure the social forces, dynamics, and interactions that shape everyday life. To understand the social world and the meanings that actors attribute to it, ethnography typically adopts an exploratory orientation and is characterised by rich and thick description of cultural phenomena (Geertz, 1973; Hammersley, 1992). Given my aim to explore rural youth lived experiences and the culturally situated meanings they attach to their activities, ethnography was chosen as the most appropriate approach. It offers a framework to understand complex social realities from participants' perspectives and to capture the nuances of meaning-making embedded in their everyday practices.

Rooted in cultural anthropology, ethnography in educational research is defined as "research on and in educational institutions based on participant observation and/or permanent recordings of everyday life in naturally occurring settings" (Delamont & Atkinson, 1995, p. 15). Several classical school ethnographies conducted in the UK have contextualised student experiences within the wider school and social structure. For instance, Paul Willis's (1977) seminal study explored how working-class boys formed a counter-school culture and resisted dominant educational values. Similarly, Corrigan (1979) examined how school structures disciplined and labelled working-class boys. Other notable examples include Lacey (1970) and Hargreaves (1967), whose studies analysed how the school streaming and differentiation systems influenced students' self-perceptions and attitudes. More recently, Russell (2005b) examined student resistance across three secondary schools, with attention to how class, gender, ethnicity and national identity shaped students' strategies of resistance. Collectively, these studies demonstrate how ethnography offers a rich lens through which to understand social inequalities, schooling experiences, and the complex interplay between student agency

and institutional structures. Situated in a rural educational setting in China, my study explores the positioning of a group of underachieving students within a system that often marginalises those who do not conform to dominant academic and behavioural standards. Rather than focusing primarily on broad social categories such as class, gender, or ethnicity, this study centres on students' interpersonal relationships - particularly their interactions with peers and their experiences of teacher-student dynamics - with the aim of understanding how students make sense of these encounters and how they interact with school structures and wider socio-cultural systems.

The choice of ethnography also aligns with my conceptualisation of children and young people (Punch, 2002). Rather than viewing them as passive recipients of adult structures and expectations, I perceive them as active social agents and competent meaning-makers in their own right (James et al., 1998). This perspective requires a deliberate shift away from adult-centred and teacher-centred frameworks, and a commitment to understanding the social world from the students' point of view. Ethnography, through immersive participation in their everyday lives and environments, facilitates such an understanding. At the same time, I recognise that I cannot fully remove myself from the position of being an adult or researcher. These identities inevitably shape the relationships I formed in the field and how students related to me. However, I aimed to reconfigure the usual researcher-participant dynamic: I became the learner for most part, while the students took on the role of experts in their own lives. This reflects the ethos of ethnographic inquiry: "rather than studying people, ethnography means learning from people" (Spradley, 1980, p. 3). I return to these field relations and reflect further on my roles in section 4.4.

As Wolcott (1975) observed, educational ethnography must take a broad perspective - looking beyond what occurs in the formal school environment to consider what is also learned informally outside of it. In this study, my focus extends beyond students' experiences of schooling to also examine their engagement with social media, particularly in relation to how their online and offline social worlds are interconnected. Given the centrality of digital media in young people's everyday lives as spaces where they socialise and express themselves, it is important to take it into account to better understand their lived experiences. Accordingly, in addition to fieldwork conducted at a rural middle school, I also employed digital ethnography, which will be elaborated on in the following section.

4.1.2 Connecting online and offline

Early digital ethnographers, often referred to as cyber-ethnographers, approached the internet as a discrete space, studying online interactions as separate from offline life (Hallett & Barber, 2014; Robinson & Schulz, 2009). In this view, individuals were thought to perform distinct online identities that could be studied apart from their physical-world practices. However, this dichotomous framing has increasingly been challenged. Scholars have recognised the internet not merely as a separate space or communication medium but as an embedded, embodied, and everyday part of social life (Hine, 2015; Markham, 2018). People's experiences and identities are shaped through a constant flow between online and offline worlds. As Leander and McKim (2003) argue, meaning-making increasingly occurs across these blurred boundaries, where online activities extend rather than replace offline relationships. Following this perspective, the internet in my study is interpreted not simply as a tool or a separate site of interaction, but as a way of being (Markham, 2018).

In light of this understanding, the concept of a bounded, physical "field site" becomes insufficient for ethnographic work in digitally mediated contexts. Instead, as Hine (2000, 2015) and Bluteau (2021) suggest, the field can be re-imagined as a "field flow" - a fluid, relational space constructed through the tracing of social connections, both online and offline. Studies of youth (sub)cultures have also noted that young people experience their cultural lives as a continuous virtual-physical hybrid (Bennett, 2004; Wilson, 2006; Wilson & Atkinson, 2005) since their digital engagement is deeply rooted in their local, material, and social contexts. This understanding strongly supports a multi-sited ethnographic approach. In this study, offline methods such as classroom observation, informal interactions, and interviews within the school setting were paired with digital ethnographic methods, including following participants' posts and interactions on *Kuaishou*. This combination enables a richer, more contextualised understanding of how students negotiate identity, belonging, and relationships across different social settings. As Lane (2016) and Dalsgaard (2016) argue, offline observation provides the contextual depth that online-only research often lacks. For instance, while I observe themes of students' online practices, their offline narratives and behaviours can provide the crucial cultural and emotional framing to interpret their digital expressions.

Furthermore, some strands of digital ethnography embraced the technical logic of the internet to explore the flow of communication, such as the use of hashtags, often without engaging

human participants (such as Vickery, 2020; Zeng & Abidin, 2021). While such approach can be useful for studying a targeted media event or movement, my research aligns with a more contextualised, participant-centred approach. This involves understanding the meanings that content creators themselves attribute to their posts and performances (Airoldi, 2018). As Postill and Pink (2012) argue, it is essential to reconfigure social media as a fieldwork environment that is "social, experiential, and mobile" (p. 125). This orientation suits my research aim: to explore not just what students do online, but how they understand and reflect on those practices within their everyday lives and also within the broader socio-cultural environment they are situated in.

In sum, this methodological approach is both conceptually and pragmatically necessary. The digital is not a separate world to be studied in isolation but a constitutive part of young people's everyday lives especially for those on the social and educational margins. Thus, this study applies both school and digital ethnography to provide a rich understanding of rural youth social worlds through analysing the flows of meaning and interaction across offline and online spaces.

4.2 Field site and participants

4.2.1 Research field site

As introduced in Chapter 1, a few years prior to starting this PhD study, I worked in a rural middle school in China as a volunteer teacher for two years. The school where I previously worked was selected as the research site based on both practical and theoretical considerations. Practically, accessibility is a key concern in ethnographic fieldwork (Gobo, 2008), and my prior relationship with the school facilitated access and enabled early rapport-building with staff and students. Theoretically, the school also aligned well with the focus of my research. A significant number of students at the school were both academically low-achieving and digitally connected. Although specific regional data on individual access to digital devices was unavailable, national trends indicate a steady expansion of digital access in rural areas of China (CNNIC, 2025). My own observations during my previous time at the school confirmed that many students had access to personal mobile devices. Additionally, only a relatively small percentage of students (usually one-third or fewer) could be able to progress to academic high schools. The remainder pursued non-academic tracks (such as vocational schools) or entered the workforce after graduation (at the age of 16). As my

research focuses on this group of academically disengaged but digitally engaged students, the school provided an appropriate setting for the study.

The school's demographic and socioeconomic context reflects broader patterns of rural-urban inequality in China. Yunnan province, where the school is located in southwest China, is one of the less economically developed provinces, with agriculture, tobacco, mining, and tourism constituting its main industries. Many parents work as migrant labourers in urban areas, leaving their children, commonly referred to as "left-behind children" in the care of grandparents or other relatives (Hong & Fuller, 2019). Other families remain in the village, sustaining themselves through small-scale farming and livestock raising.

The school itself is a boarding middle school serving students aged 13 to 16 across three-year groups (Grades 7 to 9). Students from the surrounding area attend this school after completing six years of primary education, as part of the state's compulsory education system. Located in a mountainous region approximately one hour drive from the nearest town, the school requires all students and teachers to reside on campus from Sunday to Friday during the school term, returning home for weekends and holidays. During school days, students are required to adhere to a scheduled routine. **Table 2** below is an edited version of the daily schedule for students based on the official school timetable.

Table 2 School timetable

Time	Activities
6:30 - 6:45	Wake-up (in dormitory rooms)
6:45 - 6:55	Morning exercise (on the playground)
6:55 - 7:20	Breakfast (in the canteen)
7:20 – 9:55	Morning classes (10min breaks between classes)
9:55 - 10:30	Morning assembly (on the playground)
10:30 – 12:10	Morning classes (10min breaks between classes)
12:10 - 13:00	Lunch and cleaning duties (in the canteen and other spaces of the school)

13:00 - 13:40	Nap time (in dormitory rooms)
13:50 - 17:25	Afternoon classes (10min breaks between classes)
17:25 - 18:15	Dinner and cleaning duties (in the canteen and other spaces of the school)
18:15 - 21:00	Evening classes (10min breaks between classes)
21:00 - 21:30	Night snacks and bedtime routines (canteen and dormitory rooms)

As Christensen and James (2001) said, schools function as environments in which "children saw themselves as having little or no control over how to spend time at school" (p. 79). This was clearly reflected in my field site, as illustrated in Table 2, where students' daily lives were regulated by a highly structured timetable. From the moment they woke until bedtime, students' activities and movements were governed by institutional scheduling, leaving little room for autonomy. This lack of freedom was a recurring theme in students' narratives. Many likened the school environment to a "prison". The following excerpt from my fieldnotes demonstrates this sentiment:

> Entering the school gate seems to mean "no freedom", "no mobile phones" and "no snacks". Upon their return to school on Sunday afternoons, teachers would check their schoolbags at the gate scrutinising for contraband items such as cigarettes and snacks; once entering the school, they are not allowed to step out the school gate until Friday afternoon when the school finishes upon approval from teachers…In the teacher's meeting, the headmaster emphasised the importance of monitoring students round the clock. Teachers are held accountable if the student climbed over the wall and skipped school during their designated monitoring periods. (Fieldnotes, Sunday, 16 April 2023)

The school had strict regulations on appearance and behaviour, including daily uniform requirements and restrictions on hairstyles. Teachers were assigned specific duties to monitor student conduct in various spots, from canteens to dormitories. Disciplinary practices varied depending on the nature of the rule violation, ranging from verbal warnings and cleaning duties to corporal punishment and parental involvement.

The above description of the school setting and the strict control it exerts over students sets an important institutional context within which students' educational experiences are situated. It offers a crucial backdrop for understanding the everyday realities of school life, particularly for those positioned at the margins of academic success. This contextual framing informs the analysis in Chapters 5 and 6, where I examine students' relationships with teachers and school authorities, and critically analyse how they responded to the experiences of disrespect within the school environment.

4.2.2 Access and gatekeeper

Gaining access to the field site initially went smoothly thanks to my previous working experiences at school and the existing ties with the local education network. Although the headmaster had changed since my time there as a volunteer teacher, he knew of me through his earlier role at the local education bureau, where he had coordinated the teaching programme I joined. This prior connection helped, and he quickly granted approval for my fieldwork.

The situation became more complex a few months before my fieldwork. The headmaster contacted me with an urgent request to fill in as a substitute mathematics teacher due to staff shortages. While I appreciated the trust, I declined this request, citing concerns about the heavy workload and the potential tension with my research responsibilities, especially in relation to the ethical implications of occupying a dual role as both researcher and teacher (Punch, 2001). However, less than a week before I was due to travel, I received a second request - this time to teach geography for approximately two months. I accepted due to several reasons. Compared to mathematics, geography carried a lighter teaching load and I had prior experience teaching the subject. Also, I recognised the importance of maintaining a cooperative relationship with the headmaster, who was the gatekeeper to the field, and saw it as a form of reciprocity. In the end, the teaching role turned out to be beneficial in certain ways: it gave me insider access to student information and staff communication channels and facilitated more natural opportunities to connect with students. How I navigated my dual roles at school is discussed in section 4.4.

Being assigned this role just before departure forced me to reconsider aspects of my research design, including recruitment strategies, how I presented myself to students, and how I managed shifting power dynamics. As Russell (2013) notes, ethnographic research often

requires ongoing negotiation and adaptation to changing conditions and contingencies - something I experienced directly even before entering the field.

4.2.3 Recruiting participants

I recruited 22 key informants in this study using a combination of convenience, purposive and snowball sampling strategies. Participant selection was guided by two criteria: 1) **academic underachievement**: students whose exam results were consistently below the school average; 2) **active engagement on *Kuaishou***: students who self-identified as regular and active users of *Kuaishou*. Students with high academic attainment or those not using *Kuaishou* were excluded by design.

Identifying academically underachieving students was relatively straightforward as student exam results were publicly accessible information. Also, these students often stood out socially and spatially. They typically sat at the back of the classroom, congregated during class breaks, and adopted distinctive styles (such as visible tattoos) that set them apart from their high-achieving peers.

Convenience and purposive sampling guided the initial stage of recruitment (Robinson, 2014). I began with students from the two classes I was teaching, as they were the most accessible and familiar. Within these classes, I approached some of the academically under-attaining students and through informal conversations, asked whether they were active users of *Kuaishou*. These initial participants were selected purposefully as they met both inclusion criteria. Beyond teaching hours, I used informal opportunities such as breaktimes, mealtimes and evenings in the canteen to approach students for casual conversation and explain my research in a low-pressure manner. Access to other classes and dormitory spaces was gradually negotiated through ongoing rapport-building with students; once students became familiar with my presence, they were more willing to involve me in their peer spaces, including inviting me to spend time with them during school breaks or their group activities on weekends.

To extend recruitment further, I also employed snowball sampling (Parker et al., 2019), as initial participants introduced me to their friends who were also *Kuaishou* users. In addition, I observed early participants' online activity and identified more active users through platform recommendations and visible peer interactions.

For online inclusion, I recruited students who self-identified as active *Kuaishou* users and later verified this through the frequency and regularity of their posting patterns. After students agreed to participate, I asked whether they were comfortable sharing their *Kuaishou* usernames or allowing me to follow their accounts. This step was always taken after verbal assent and only once written parental/guardian consent had been returned. Students typically shared their usernames directly or added me as a follower on the platform. Online access was therefore based on participants' voluntary invitation rather than passive or covert observation. Once connected, I monitored their posts and interactions on weekends when they had access to digital devices. Only content visible to me through this consensual access was included in the data. More detailed discussion of informed consent and ethical procedures is provided in Section 4.5.1.

The table below provides basic information about each participant, including pseudonyms, gender, and grade/year level.

Table 3 Participant list

	Participant pseudonym	Gender	Grade[4]
1	Li Yun	Male	Nine
2	Zhang Zhen	Male	Eight
3	Liu Shi	Male	Eight
4	Zhaocai	Male	Eight
5	Zhang Mili	Female	Eight
6	Ma Juan	Female	Eight
7	Lin Na	Female	Eight
8	Xiao Ying	Female	Eight
9	Chen Rui	Male	Eight
10	Xiao Xia	Female	Eight

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[4]The school includes three year levels at the middle school stage (equivalent to Grades 7–9), following six years of primary education. Students in these years are typically aged 13–16.

11	Xiaoshuai	Male	Eight
12	Li Susu	Female	Eight
13	Dai Peng	Male	Eight
14	Kaixin	Female	Eight
15	Miao Han	Female	Eight
16	Luo Cheng	Male	Eight
17	Wang Xu	Male	Eight
18	Fang Yuan	Male	Seven
19	Zeng Kai	Male	Seven
20	Zuo Lang	Male	Seven
21	Apple	Male	Seven
22	He Chao	Male	Seven

4.3 Data collection

In this study, data were collected through participant observation (both online and offline) and two rounds of semi-structured interviews. The school-based fieldwork lasted fourteen weeks (April - July 2023), covering daily classroom observations, informal participation in students' leisure activities, and observations and conversations during breaks, mealtimes and evening study periods. Interview rounds were spaced across the term, allowing emerging observations to inform later questioning. Online observation began in early May, once I had gained access to participants' *Kuaishou* accounts, and continued throughout the term and for six additional weekends after I left the school. This period coincided with the summer holiday, during which mobile phone access increased and online posting became more frequent. Because the fieldwork covered only one academic term, I could not directly observe major school events such as the sports day or cultural festival, though their significance was highlighted through students' accounts. Figure 1 below presents an integrated timeline of both school-based and online fieldwork, showing the phases and the corresponding field activities.

Figure 1 Timeline of fieldwork

Entry & Rapport-building (Week 1-4)
- Gaining access
- Recruiting participants and obtaining consent
- Informal interactions at school during breaks
- Initial classroom and corridor observations

Mid-term phase (Week 5-9)
- Online observation on *Kuaishou* began (early May)
- Regular classroom observations across six classes
- First-round interviews with participants

Late-term phase (Week 10-14)
- Ongoing online and offline observation
- Second-round interviews
- Home visits and weekend hangouts with participants
- Focused observation of peer group activities in informal spaces at school

Post-school online phase (mid-July - late August)
- Continued remote observation of participants' practices on *Kuaishou* (6 weeks)

Data collected in this study consists of extensive fieldnotes, interview transcripts, and online multimedia content including screenshots of online posts, profiles, and interactive practices, as well as images and videos shared by participants. Below, I explain each method of data collection in detail.

4.3.1 Participant observation

Offline observation

Observation took place primarily within the school setting. My position on the spectrum between observer and participant shifted over time. During the early weeks, I adopted a more observational stance, gradually transitioning to active participation as students became more comfortable and began inviting me to join their activities.

Classroom observations were conducted primarily during my own lessons and in open demonstration classes, which were accessible to all teaching staff. Because of my relatively informal role (which I reflect on further in section 4.4), my own lessons tended to offer a more relaxed environment. This created opportunities to observe students' everyday classroom behaviours and peer interactions in a less structured context. In contrast, demonstration classes had a more formal atmosphere, where other teachers were often invited to observe either from the back or, when possible, by sitting with students. Although I remained positioned as an adult and teacher, sitting among students rather than leading the class afforded a different observational perspective. This allowed me to notice more subtle peer dynamics, forms of quiet resistance, and how students negotiated classroom norms - aspects that might have been less visible from the front of the classroom while actively teaching.

Observations beyond the classroom sought to capture students' everyday social interactions and how they navigated relationships with both teachers and peers, including their interactions with me - insights that helped me reflect on how my presence and role may have shaped their practices. These observations included informal conversations, interaction patterns, and moments of exclusion or resistance. I also conducted limited observations outside the school setting, such as in nearby shops where students often gathered before returning to campus on Sunday afternoons, and in their home villages during weekends and school holidays. During these moments, I recorded fieldnotes on students' social behaviours, the nature of their interactions with one another, and how their engagement with me in these informal settings compared with our interactions at school. However, access to students' out-of-school lives was constrained by several logistical challenges. Many students lived in villages that were both distant from the school and geographically dispersed, while public transport was limited to an infrequent local bus service. Moreover, I could neither drive nor ride a motorbike, which further constrained my mobility.

Online observation

To engage with the digital field, I downloaded *Kuaishou* onto my mobile device and created a dedicated research account. With participants' consent[5], I followed their profiles and enabled notifications to stay informed of their latest posts and interactions. In cases where participants

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[5] Parental consent for participation was obtained beforehand, as discussed in Section 4.5.1.

maintained multiple accounts - often separating public-facing content from more private or anonymous expressions, I followed all associated accounts upon their approval.

Unlike Wilson (2006), who was able to join an online forum dedicated to rave culture in order to familiarise himself with the community before entering the field, this kind of preparatory immersion was not possible in my case due to the nature of *Kuaishou*. *Kuaishou* is structured around individually curated accounts so there was no shared online community that I could observe in advance. Nonetheless, reviewing media coverage and online discussions about rural youth's social media use in China provided useful contextual understanding. While boyd's (2015) research is based in the US, I draw on her methodological approach of engaging with secondary sources and digital content to familiarise myself with youth culture prior to fieldwork.

Although creating a digital self and attempting to become part of the online communities one is studying can offer valuable insight into their cultural practices (Bluteau, 2021), I chose not to actively engage in the same or similar ways as the participants for two key reasons. First, my social position and life experience as an adult researcher differed markedly from those of my participants. This difference made it both inappropriate and difficult for me to authentically join their digital community and replicate their digital performances. Second, I sought to minimise any disruption to the cultural practices and relationships under observation (Epstein, 1998). In line with this, I deliberately refrained from publicly interacting with participants' posts - avoiding likes, comments, or shares. Private messaging via the platform was used occasionally to communicate with participants. Participants sometimes shared posts with me or engaged in casual conversations, which helped maintain rapport and provided additional insights into their everyday digital practices. I also posted sporadically on my own account to maintain a visible presence and facilitate relationship-building, as participants often responded to or engaged with my content. This process of content creation was also a learning experience for me, not only in terms of the technical aspects of the platform, but also in understanding the cultural norms shared within the group (Hine, 2015). For example, after I uploaded my first post on *Kuaishou*, several participants pointed out that it was "unacceptable" to post without adding any music.

I documented participants' posts through screenshots, including comments and profile pages, and downloaded original images or videos when permitted. During fieldwork, I checked *Kuaishou* regularly to monitor new activities: several times a day over the weekends, and at

least once each weekday (in case students accessed their devices while absent from school due to illness or other reasons, or by breaking school rules). A limitation of this approach was the inability to capture all content due to the rapidly changing nature of participants' online activity including frequent post deletions. However, this did not significantly impact the study as it focused on meaning-making and cultural patterns rather than quantifying user engagement and content volume. To keep the data organised, I created a folder for each participant on my laptop where I stored all related screenshots and media.

Ethnographic fieldnotes

Ethnographic fieldnotes from both school/offline-based and online observations were recorded on a daily basis during the fieldwork period. For online observations, this often took place on weekends during term time, when students had access to digital devices. I used Microsoft OneNote software to document and organise my fieldnotes. Throughout the day, I jotted down brief notes or keywords (on my phone in informal settings and on my notebook in classroom observations), which I then expanded into fuller entries in the evenings, typically structured chronologically around the day's events. On particularly long or emotionally demanding days, I recorded voice memos instead, which were transcribed and incorporated into OneNote the following day.

Fieldnotes written on school days primarily documented classroom activities, staff-student interactions and peer dynamics in school spaces. In contrast, weekend fieldnotes usually captured online observations, students' *Kuaishou* posts and interactions, as well as occasional home visits or informal gatherings outside school. Each fieldnote entry was divided into two main parts: descriptive accounts and initial analytic reflections (Emerson et al., 2001). The descriptive section captured what I observed in detail, focusing on students' behaviours, interactions (with peers, school staff and other adults, and myself), and the broader institutional and social context. The analytic section included initial analytical notes, reflective comments and questions I aimed to explore further (see a fieldnote excerpt in Appendix 5.2.1). This approach fostered continuous reflexivity, enabling me to critically revisit earlier observations and refine my field practices. Moreover, the consistent structure of descriptive and analytic sections enhanced the codability of the fieldnotes: the separation between observation and reflection allowed for efficient data coding and analysis in NVivo.

4.3.2 Interviews

This study employed an ethnographic approach that combined participant observation with interviews. This approach allowed for a deeper exploration of the subjects' experiences and perspectives, complementing insights gained through observation. Each participant (22 in total) took part in two rounds of semi-structured interviews, conducted individually with the exception of two students who requested a paired interview. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin; when students used local dialect terms unfamiliar to me, I asked them to explain in Mandarin. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

In recognition of the time it often takes to build trust with children and young people (Morrow & Richards, 1996), formal interviews were scheduled after several weeks of informal interaction. This approach encouraged openness and more authentic responses (Hudson, 2004; Tickle, 2017), which was particularly important in this study, as it explored students' thoughts, values and behaviours that may not align with mainstream norms, and in some cases, may even challenge or violate institutional expectations. While interviews are common in many research designs, in ethnography they are shaped by the ongoing, immersive relationship between the researcher and participants. The strength of ethnographic interviewing lies in the trusting and sustained researcher-researched relationships developed over time, which enable in-depth, situated and meaningful knowledge production (Heyl, 2001). The first round of interviews focused broadly on participants' school experiences, peer and teacher relationships, and their use of *Kuaishou* (see appendix 3). Questions were open-ended and flexible, with sequencing adjusted according to each participant's responses. The second round was more structured, drawing on earlier responses, observational data, and, in some cases, specific online posts, which I showed to participants to elicit their interpretations and reflections on their content. This also demonstrates the benefits of applying different methods as giving hints and examples from observation can facilitate people to talk and share in interviews (Becker & Geer, 1957).

Since most respondents had little knowledge and experience of doing interviews, a more informal approach was often helpful (Flewitt, 2017). To create a relaxed interview environment, I deliberately avoided formal language, for instance, referring to interviews as "chats", and reminded participants of their right to skip questions or withhold information. I reiterated the distinction between my researcher role and institutional authority, assuring them that there were no "right" answers and that their confidentiality would be protected.

Small talks before each session also helped to ease interviewees' initial discomfort. For many participants, the experience of speaking with an adult who listened without judgement was unfamiliar, but their confidence and willingness to share significantly increased by the second round of interviews.

Challenges and reflections on interviewing

Several challenges emerged in the process of conducting interviews. Locating suitable times and spaces was particularly difficult. As other scholars noted, schools as a social setting organised and controlled by adults may not be a good place for doing interviews with students (Alderson & Morrow, 2020; Punch, 2002). While I initially planned to conduct interviews outside the school premises, logistical and ethical constraints made it difficult. Taking students off school grounds could raise safety concerns or offer opportunities for unsanctioned behaviour. Most interviews were therefore conducted on school premises, with a few done near the school site and during weekend visits in local villages.

Scheduling interviews required coordination with both my teaching timetable and the school calendar. Although some students were willing or indeed, eager to be interviewed during class time, I tried to avoid this as it would disrupt their learning and potentially cause tension with teaching staff. As a result, most interviews were conducted during breaks or self-study sessions. This arrangement restricted interview length and added pressure when conversations went off-topic. When some participants talked at length about their lives, I felt tension between allowing them to express themselves and steering the discussion to ensure relevant data collection. At times, I experienced discomfort interrupting their narratives, especially when it was clear that they valued the opportunity to share personal stories with an attentive adult.

A key methodological learning was the importance of adapting interview design and language to participants' levels of comprehension (Valentine, 1999). After the first few interviews, I realised that certain academic or abstract terms such as "mainstream culture" were not well understood and thus I revised my phrasing to use simpler, more accessible language, taking into account their literacy levels and familiarity with certain concepts. This iterative process not only improved the quality of data collected but also sharpened my own reflexive awareness and interviewing skills.

4.4 Multiple positionings: field relations and roles

As a novice ethnographer, managing field relations and navigating multiple roles when interacting with young participants can be challenging. Throughout the fieldwork, I occupied shifting positions in relation to participants in order to foster connection and trust. The following section offers a reflexive account of these positionings, the relational strategies I employed, and the ways in which I negotiated power dynamics in the field.

4.4.1 Between insider and outsider

For ethnographers, it is crucial to be reflexive on how one's personal attributes shape relationships with participants and influence the data collection process (Hertz, 1997). In many respects, I was perceived as an outsider in the field. As a 29-year-old woman from a more economically developed region in southeastern China, and a PhD student studying in the UK, I occupied a distinct social position in comparison with the students I worked with. While I also grew up in a rural area, the rurality of my upbringing differed from that of my participants in terms of economic development, cultural environment, and ethnicity. Most of the students in the school belonged to a minority ethnic group, whereas I am Han Chinese, the dominant ethnic majority in China. These differences were often immediately visible, for instance, my Mandarin accent differed from theirs (they often perceived mine as more standard as their accent was often interspersed with local dialects), and my comparatively lighter skin tone, a result of both geography and lifestyle, marked me as an outsider in this sun-exposed mountainous region.

These ascribed characteristics may position me as someone distant from students' social environment, potentially hindering rapport and mutual understanding. However, my previous two-year teaching experience at this school provided a valuable bridge. This prior engagement allowed me to develop a nuanced understanding of the school's institutional culture, local dialects, and everyday routines. Some of my former students came from the same villages as my participants, and in several cases, my participants were close friends or relatives of students I had previously taught. These social connections helped foster trust and familiarity. Moreover, my earlier immersion in the community - through teaching, conducting home visits, travelling locally, and participating in school life - offered a shared set of reference points that I could draw upon in conversations with students. This background

helped me anticipate certain aspects of their school and home experiences, even as I remained alert to change and prepared for the unpredictability of ethnographic work (Russell, 2013).

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the relative privileges I had in this research context. As a doctoral student with access to higher education abroad, I occupied a structurally advantaged position compared to the young people I worked with, many of whom faced academic marginalisation and limited post-school opportunities. My educational status, economic security (even though temporarily) and ability to move between rural and urban (and international) contexts demonstrated my relative privileges. While I made efforts to build rapport and mitigate power imbalances through sustained engagement and informal interaction, such structural privileges need to be acknowledged and reflexively engaged in the process of my fieldwork and analysis.

My role as a substitute teacher during the fieldwork further complicated my positionality. As a staff member, I was granted institutional access and insights that might have remained hidden to a complete outsider. As noted earlier, I was familiar with the school culture through my prior teaching experience, yet I was still a non-local and non-official teacher, and lacked insider knowledge of the peer culture among my research participants. Importantly, I was also an adult and authority figure - a position I could not fully step outside of. In this sense, I occupied a complex and shifting position between insider and outsider (Hamilton, 2017): while I had insider access and familiarity with the school context, I remained an outsider to the lived experiences and peer dynamics of the students, particularly as someone who could never fully shed the adult status that shaped our interactions.

As Reinharz (1997) argues, ethnographers both "bring the self" into the field and "create the self" within it (p. 3). While the ascribed characteristics I carried can be understood as aspects of the "brought self" and my position as a substitute teacher represented a passively "created self", I also actively constructed an identity beyond that of a teacher through ongoing negotiation with the field's social norms and the ways in which participants responded to my "brought self". In the following section, I explore my situationally "created self" in the field.

4.4.2 Acting as a "friendly teacher/adult" and "least teacher/adult"

The researcher-researched relationship is a reciprocal, co-constitutive process shaped by both parties - me getting to know the participants, and them learning about me (Russell, 2005a;

Wang, 2013). In line with Hudson (2004), I sought to perceive students as "whole selves", recognising the complexity of their lived experiences beyond academic performance. This was particularly important in helping me move beyond a teacher's lens and resist deficit-based assumptions about "underachieving students". Similarly, I aimed to share aspects of my "whole self" in the field - not only as a teacher or academic researcher, but as someone with multiple roles shaped by interaction with participants. While I remained mindful of professional boundaries, I made efforts to be approachable and relatable in ways that supported trust and reciprocity.

Building rapport and trusting relationships becomes particularly challenging when working with children and young people, especially in structured institutions like schools (Punch, 2002; Swain, 2006). My formal role as a substitute teacher added further complexity as I had to constantly navigate institutional expectations and power dynamics. To foster openness, reduce hierarchy, and better access young people's perspectives and practices, I adopted the roles of "friendly adult/teacher" and "least adult/teacher" (Batra, 2023; Epstein, 1998; Kirby, 2020; Van der Smee & Valerio, 2024). Drawing on Mandell's (1988) concept of the "least adult role", originally developed in research with young children, I suspended adult claims to cognitive and moral authority and sought to interact with students on their terms. Unlike Mandell (1988), physical difference was less relevant in my case, given that most students were about my size or larger. More importantly, this role required me to maintain critical distance from dominant norms and avoid imposing adult judgments on participants' behaviour.

Introducing myself to students

My formal role as a teacher gave me easier access to recruit participants, attend classes, and be present at school events without having to justify my presence. This role, however, also risked reinforcing hierarchical relations with students, especially if I was seen as just another "official teacher". To counter this, I made efforts to distinguish myself from other teachers in how I introduced myself, interacted with students, and positioned my research.

In my initial introductions to the two geography classes I was teaching, I openly shared that I had previously worked at the school as a volunteer and had returned to conduct fieldwork for my PhD research. To reduce the perceived social distance between myself and the students, I encouraged them to refer to me using more informal yet culturally appropriate terms, such as

"Lao Zhang" (Old Zhang) or "Ya Jie" (Sister Ya) particularly outside of classroom settings. This was intended to show my desire to foster less hierarchical and more approachable relationships. While most students continued to address me with the formal title of "teacher", as was customary, I nonetheless expressed my commitment to treating all students with fairness and respect regardless of their academic performance. This was a deliberate attempt to distance myself from the normalised practices of other teachers.

I also made a conscious effort to downplay my academic credentials, particularly my study abroad experience, as I was aware that this might create a sense of distance, given the significant disparities in our life experiences. That said, I was open to sharing aspects of my life when students expressed curiosity or asked questions. Nonetheless, I could not fully control how others chose to present me (Russell, 2005a). The headmaster and some local teachers often framed me as a "role model" for students. For example, the headmaster introduced me to the class by highlighting my PhD status in the UK and encouraging students to admire and learn from me.

Negotiating authorities and building trust

Researchers often adopt different roles depending on the social context, shaped by spatial, temporal, and relational dimensions (Hopwood, 2007). In my study, I adapted my behaviour across various settings - inside versus outside the classroom, during school hours versus weekends, and in the presence or absence of other adults. Students, in turn, responded differently based on these contexts, particularly recognising my institutional authority in classroom settings.

Within the classroom, I fulfilled my teaching responsibilities and maintained order when necessary, though I approached discipline with care and avoided harshness. Outside of teaching, however, I took on a more friendly and non-authoritative role. Since I had previously worked in the school as part of a volunteer teaching programme that emphasised more student-centred pedagogy, my less authoritative approach did not seem out of place. Also, as a substitute teacher, my role was mostly limited to teaching, and I was not expected to perform disciplinary responsibilities except in my own classes. This institutional flexibility has made enacting a "least teacher" role more feasible.

There were a few key things I tried to follow in order to separate myself from the typical image of a teacher and to build trust with participants. First, I was conscious of how appearance and non-verbal cues could influence participant perceptions (Swain, 2006). To appear approachable, I dressed casually, greeted students warmly, and maintained an open, enthusiastic demeanour. My "youthful" and "student-like" appearance seemed to help me bridge relational distance (Wang, 2013). Also, I aimed to observe participants' practices without judgment (Batra, 2023), adopting a non-disciplinary stance and respecting confidentiality, especially when they shared things they wanted to keep from teachers and other adults (Russell, 2005a). I also sought to distance myself from other staff members in students' presence (Van der Smee & Valerio, 2024), signalling that I was not aligned with their monitoring or evaluative roles. I also took part in their everyday routines, such as playing sports with them, eating in the student canteen rather than the teacher canteen, joining weekend activities, and using *Kuaishou* to interact with them outside school. Moreover, I showed a genuine interest in learning from them by highlighting my lack of knowledge about things they knew more about, such as local customs, dialect and online games. This sometimes gave them a chance to take the lead in conversations and be seen as the experts, which helped shift the usual dynamic where adults or teachers normally take the leading role in conversations (Boyle, 1999).

Some students immediately recognised my similarity to previous volunteer teachers they had encountered and associated me with those more permissive and friendly roles. Others struggled to place me within any familiar category, as they had little experience interacting with a non-authoritative adult (Mandell, 1988). Either way, their perceptions of me clearly diverged from other teachers. In interviews, when I asked them about their perceptions of me, they often positioned me in contrast to other teachers and described me as "kind", "soft", "easy to talk to" and "trustworthy". They shared personal experiences with me, including romantic relationships and family issues. Some invited me to visit their home and join them on weekends and some expressed hope that I could stay and become their teacher in the next academic year. These moments of trust and disclosure suggest that I was seen as someone outside the usual adult-teacher framework - perhaps closer to a "least adult" or even a peer-like figure. This trust can be attributed not only to my deliberate efforts in how I presented myself and interacted with them, but also to the quality of attention students received during our interactions (Boyle, 1999). As a marginalised group within the school, many of them had limited opportunities to be heard or valued in their everyday social environment. My research

thus offered them an opportunity to express their views with little concern of being judged or punished.

Still, as many ethnographers have noted, it is almost impossible to entirely resist the powerful discourse of adult/child binary and completely shed the teacher role in a school context (Atkinson, 2019; Swain, 2006; Van der Smee & Valerio, 2024). Despite my efforts, moments arose where I slipped back into the "teacher mode". In interviews, for example, I occasionally asked "teacherly" rather than "researcherly" questions about their lives (Epstein, 1998). While I tried to avoid adult value and expectations as boyd (2015) reflected in doing research with teenagers, I sometimes found myself making unintended value judgments. An illustrative moment occurred early in fieldwork. While spending time with a group of students - potential participants I hoped to recruit - I shared some photos I had previously posted on social media during my earlier time at the school as a volunteer teacher. Among the images was a photo of a geography exam paper from one of my former students who had scored 99 out of 100. I made a casual remark that I was proud of him. The students fell suddenly silent. In that moment, I realised I had unintentionally slipped back into the teacher role, reaffirming the academic values I had earlier claimed to resist. This inconsistency risked undermining the trust I was beginning to build with the students. Fortunately, because it occurred early in the research process, it became a valuable moment of reflexivity, reminding me to be more aware of how my words and actions might be interpreted, and to remain attuned to the implicit power dynamics shaping the field.

I remained aware throughout the research that I could never fully become one of the students or be seen as their peer or friend. My role remained in constant negotiation with the school's structure and culture. I had to continually weigh what I could or should do while engaging with participants, particularly when their behaviours conflicted with school rules or norms. The tensions between institutional rules and expectations and my desire to build less hierarchical relationships will be explored further in the following section.

Power shifting and challenges in negotiating boundaries

While I believed I had built close and trusted relationships with my participants, which is crucial for collecting rich and in-depth data, this relational closeness was not without its challenges. My friendly and empathetic approach helped students open up to me, but at times, it also invited behaviours where some informants attempted to test my boundaries and even

take advantage of my position. In becoming a "friendly" and "least adult" figure, I inadvertently made myself more vulnerable to power negotiations I had not fully anticipated.

Early on, I did small favours for students, such as lending them my phone to call their parents. These gestures were motivated both by a desire to build rapport and a sense of guilt over benefiting from their participation for my academic gain. While effective in fostering rapport, these actions also led to more complex boundary negotiations. As participants came to understand that I held institutional power while operating outside conventional teacher-student hierarchies, some of them began to explore how far they could push these dynamics.

Several participants made requests that challenged what I considered appropriate and raised ethical and institutional concerns. For example, some of them tried to use me as an excuse to escape classes by asking me to interview them at particular times. Other requests included asking me to take them outside the school to purchase snacks or cigarettes, storing prohibited items such as their mobile phones in my room, or borrowing money (discussed further in section 4.5.5). One fieldnote captures this tension:

> Before the eighth class in the afternoon, Zeng Kai and Zuo Lang came to my room and asked me to take them outside the school because the next class was biology, but they hadn't finished their biology homework and feared punishment. They even suggested I could interview them, and they had more to share. It was obvious they were using me as an excuse to skip class. I realised I couldn't say yes to everything. Perhaps I had been too friendly, and they assumed I would always agree to their requests. I told them I wasn't feeling well and asked them to return to class. (Fieldnotes, Sunday, 25 June 2023)

These moments again suggest how I was perceived by the participants: not as a conventional teacher bound by the school's disciplinary framework, but as someone with adult privileges and access to resources, yet outside the formal structures. They recognised that I had the power to assist them in bending or bypassing school rules, and in some cases, they actively tried to draw me into forms of collusion. Even in more innocuous situations, such as borrowing a phone to contact parents, they came to me rather than other staff, perceiving me as non-judgmental and accessible. These moments not only reflect my perceived position, but also show students' agency in navigating and resisting school structures, which I explore further in Chapter 6.

Though I had the capacity to help, I constantly had to assess whether their requests crossed ethical or institutional lines. While some were easily declined, others left me conflicted. In hindsight, my early over-kindness may have unintentionally signalled unlimited availability, encouraging further boundary-testing. Hudson (2004) pointed out that it would be too naive to think that building boundaries would prevent researchers from accessing people's social worlds because any kind of interpersonal relationships would have boundaries. As an inexperienced researcher, I prioritised relationship-building and ultimately encountered the challenge of negotiating over institutional rules and expectations, relational boundaries and ethical responsibilities.

These experiences also highlight that power within ethnographic relationships is not fixed but fluid, shifting and at times even reversing in the course of researcher-researched interactions. As Christensen (2004) argues, adult-child power dynamics are not merely determined by social positioning; rather, power is relational and produced through interaction. In engaging with student participants, I initially understood power in terms of a dichotomy - adults as holders of power and children as subordinate (Gallagher, 2008). In response, I consciously "gave up" this power by adopting a least adult/teacher role, which, while effective in gaining access to participants' social world and counter-school cultures (Atkinson, 2019), also rendered me vulnerable to forms of manipulation. Students at times subverted this relinquished authority, as seen in their "inappropriate" requests and efforts to take advantage of my role. This aligns with Barker and Smith's (2001) observation that adult power in research contexts is constantly negotiated and prone to slippage, leaving researchers potentially powerless, exposed, and exploitable. This reflection emphasises the need for ethnographers to remain critically attuned to how power is shifting in the field and to develop strategies for maintaining boundaries and negotiating relational balance.

4.5 Ethical considerations

I obtained ethical approval from the ethics committee in my department before starting data collection and followed the required protocols throughout the project. However, as Morrow and Richards (1996) argue, ethical questions arise throughout the research process especially in qualitative work where unpredictable situations often occur. This is particularly the case in ethnographic research, which is by nature open-ended and fluid. When working with children and young people, these challenges require even greater ethical sensitivity (Russell & Barley,

2022). I kept a reflective journal to document how I responded to ethically challenging moments and the decisions I made. In this section, I discuss how I approached ethics across the research process, including how I handled some of the difficult situations that arose.

4.5.1 Informed consent

There are several challenges when it comes to gaining informed consent from children and young people. One concern is that adult gatekeepers, such as teachers or parents, may end up making decisions on behalf of children (Curtis et al., 2004). This is especially problematic in schools, where students are used to being required to follow rules and participate in compulsory activities (Kirby, 2020). In my case, while I gained permission from the headteacher who in this context acted as the research site gatekeeper, this did not automatically grant me access to students. To ensure that participation was voluntary, I introduced the research to students myself instead of having teachers recruit on my behalf. I explained the project using plain and accessible language, referring to myself as a "student doing homework" rather than a "researcher", a term that they were unfamiliar with. I made it very clear that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time before data analysis began, without needing to give a reason. After obtaining verbal agreement from the students, I provided them with translated information sheets and consent forms to take home. They were asked to share these materials with their parents or guardians and return the signed forms to me. I also encouraged students to ask their parents if they had any questions or concerns and offered to provide additional clarification if needed.

Rather than treating consent as a one-off event, I saw it as an ongoing process, particularly because the research took place over a long period of time (Morrow, 2008; Valentine, 1999). I checked in with participants regularly throughout the study especially before interviews and when they shared something sensitive and reminded them of their rights to stop or withdraw. I also paid close attention to any subtle signals of discomfort or hesitation that could suggest an implicit withdrawal of consent (Kirby, 2020; Valentine, 1999). When I noticed such signals, I checked in with the participant to confirm whether they were still happy to continue. Consent was also revisited after I left the school, as online data collection continued for a few more weeks.

4.5.2 Privacy and confidentiality

Respecting children's privacy involved considering where and how I carried out observations (Alderson & Morrow, 2020). While most school areas could be considered public, places like student dormitories and toilets raised more complex issues. I asked for students' permission before visiting dormitories (only girls), which was seen as culturally appropriate since local teachers also routinely entered these spaces to monitor attendance. Besides, toilets served as important social spaces for students where they often gathered and conducted rule-breaking behaviours. However, I decided not to observe in toilets based on concerns about intruding on privacy and the potential to disrupt students' activities. Instead, I relied on participants' verbal accounts to understand these contexts.

To protect participants' privacy and ensure confidentiality, only the name of the province in which the research was conducted is reported. All other potentially identifying information, including the name of the town and school, participants' real names, and their *Kuaishou* profile names, was removed. Participants were invited to choose their own pseudonyms; when they preferred not to, I assigned pseudonyms on their behalf.

4.5.3 Collecting online data

Online data introduce additional ethical concerns. Although social media platforms are generally seen as public, the use of such content in research particularly with vulnerable populations requires explicit consent (Kozinets, 2020). I obtained consent to view and collect participants' social media content. Given the interactive nature of these platforms, I also encountered data involving non-participants (such as comments). Only content directly related to participants was analysed, with non-participant identities anonymised (Hennell et al., 2020; Kosinski et al., 2015).

Ensuring anonymity in online research is notably more challenging than in offline contexts, since search engines can efficiently trace digital content back to its source (Zimmer, 2010). Consequently, minimising the searchability of online data becomes paramount. For textual material such as participants' captions, translating the original Chinese into English both avoids verbatim quotation and reduces the need for extensive paraphrasing. Visual data can be more complicated since photos may carry more personally identifiable information (Hennell et al., 2020). Therefore, I sought and obtained separate consent from participants

and their parents before using any visual content in my presentation and dissemination of findings.

Researchers' approaches to using online images vary. Some chose to use original images with account-holder permission (Ravn et al., 2020), while others stress de-identification by altering the images such as using censor bars, filters, or cartoonification (Caruso & Roberts, 2017; Tiidenberg, 2018; Warfield et al., 2019). Despite critiques that anonymisation distorts representation (Allen, 2015; Nutbrown, 2011), protecting participants' privacy was prioritised in this study (Blaisdell et al., 2019). I used offline editing (via Microsoft PowerPoint) to apply artistic filters and obscure faces thereby ensuring de-identification and protecting confidentiality. This avoids uploading images to third-party platforms, which could result in unwanted data storage or sharing beyond my control.

A further ethical issue was the transient nature of online content (Warfield et al., 2019). Participants frequently deleted and updated posts, which raised questions about post-hoc consent. Deleted posts were treated with caution and only used if additional consent was obtained. While none of the participants withdrew permission, most of the online content used in analysis was no longer publicly available by the time I started data analysis.

4.5.4 Incentives

The use of incentives needs to be considered carefully, particularly when working with children. I avoided giving cash payments to prevent creating a sense of obligation or imbalance (Alderson & Morrow, 2020). However, small non-monetary tokens of appreciation are generally accepted as appropriate and ethical (Rice & Broome, 2004). When first approaching participants, I informed them that a small gift would be given at the end of the study and they were welcome to suggest what they might like. Taking into account guidance from Afkinich and Blachman-Demner (2020) and the local context, I chose a culturally and seasonally appropriate gift: a small handheld rechargeable fan for each participant. Each fan cost approximately £1, which, in local terms, was roughly equivalent to the price of a couple of bottled drinks at nearby shops. They were distributed at the end of fieldwork in July, during the hot summer season, and were well received.

4.5.5 Other ethical issues, dilemmas and reflections

The ethical considerations discussed so far are largely applicable to most qualitative studies. However, there are several context-specific ethical challenges that emerged from working with this group of participants and through the nature of my interactions in the field.

While my research focused on students who were labelled or experienced as "bad students" or "low achievers", I deliberately avoided disclosing this focus during recruitment. This decision was made to prevent further marginalisation and to avoid influencing how teachers or peers might interact with these students. When introducing the study, I framed my interest as being in students' broader school experiences and digital engagement, rather than signalling judgment or reinforcing negative labels. Although themes of labelling and marginalisation were discussed in interviews, I aimed to maintain a neutral, and sometimes sympathetic stance. For example, I did not explicitly agree or disagree when students spoke negatively about their teachers or other adults, nor did I try to "correct" their views or encourage them to study harder to achieve academic success, even though I occasionally slipped back into the "teacher mode", as mentioned previously.

Socio-cultural context also played a significant role in shaping my ethical decision-making (Sharma, 2022). Differences between my own values particularly around children's rights and educational philosophy and those held by local educators sometimes created ethical discomfort. Many teachers viewed students as subordinate and expected strict obedience, with corporal punishment or verbal humiliation still used as disciplinary methods. I witnessed several incidents during which students were punished in ways I perceived as dehumanising. One case involved a student being excluded from class because of her poor academic performance, effectively denying her right to education. These events, some of which are discussed in Chapter 5, raised the question of whether I should intervene. Ultimately, I chose not to, recognising that such disciplinary practices were embedded in local school culture and justified by teachers as being in students' best interests. As the school headmaster explained in an informal conversation, these practices were believed to educate and motivate students. While I disagreed with such educational practices, I did not feel it was my place to challenge local authority or risk jeopardising my fieldwork. Nevertheless, I hope that the findings of this study can contribute to reflections on educational values and disciplinary practices in schools, as will be further discussed in Chapter 9.

Another unexpected ethical dilemma arose when participants began asking to borrow money from me. It started with one student requesting 14 yuan (approximately £1.50, a relatively small amount in local context) to buy a gift for a friend, promising to repay it the following day. Over time, more students - both participants and others - started making similar requests, usually for small amounts (between £1 and £3) and often for what seemed to be legitimate reasons, such as bus fares. I initially agreed, as offering such support was not uncommon among local teachers in emergencies. Although all loans were repaid promptly, the requests continued even after I left the school. While the amounts remained small, I ultimately decided to decline further requests to avoid becoming entangled in ongoing financial support, which could complicate our relationship and cause ethical concerns.

In hindsight, the emergence of this unexpected issue may also reflect a lack of shared cultural reference points between myself and the students. I had limited experience in acting as a "least-adult" role, and the students similarly had little understanding of how to interact with someone in that position or what boundaries should exist within it. While lending money is not the same as offering financial incentives which may pressure participants to take part due to economic need (Alderson & Morrow, 2020), it may raise similar ethical concerns. Even though it was never my intention, participants might have perceived participation in my study as a condition for receiving financial help. This could compromise the voluntariness of their consent, particularly in the context of working with economically disadvantaged students. As Henderson et al. (2013) argue, research ethics should be seen as a dialogic process between researchers and participants, enabling the negotiation of ethical dilemmas as they arise. I now realise that I should have communicated more clearly with students from the beginning when they made such requests, to set boundaries and avoid escalating dilemmas later. I felt uncomfortable repeatedly refusing their requests after leaving the field, as it may have made them feel that I only supported them when they were "useful" for my research. I also recognise that my discomfort in these situations may have stemmed from my own urban, academic, and Westernised assumptions about ethical conduct in research. Within the local context, small financial exchanges may be habitual and embedded in everyday social relationships. As an outsider, I may have unintentionally disrupted these practices by interpreting them through a different ethical lens. This again highlights the importance of not only setting clear boundaries, but also attending to the culturally situated moral worlds in which fieldwork takes place.

4.6 Emotion work as a methodological tool

Emotion work and management is an integral part of doing qualitative research (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). While my role as a teacher helped me integrate into the school community, the emotional demands of navigating dual roles and sustained interaction with participants remained significant. I invested substantial emotional energy in presenting myself as a friendly, enthusiastic and approachable adult, often managing my own frustration or discomfort to maintain a consistently positive presence. This emotional labour extended to listening empathetically to students' accounts of personal struggle, navigating awkward social moments, and dealing with feelings of guilt for occupying their limited free time (Hamilton, 2017). These experiences highlight that emotion work is not peripheral but central to fieldwork, and that researchers must remain mindful of their own well-being and self-care throughout the process (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Winfield, 2022).

Strategic emotional management, in most cases, supported the development of my identity in the field and the quality of my relationships with participants. Beyond rapport-building, emotional responses, both from participants and the researcher can be informative in understanding the setting and field relations, particularly in moments involving discomfort and awkwardness (Schmidt et al., 2024). Trigger et al. (2012) defined such moments as "revelatory moments" in fieldwork. One revelatory moment in my fieldwork took place in my social interaction with one participant, Luo Cheng who I developed a close relationship with. He once shared "private secrets" (a phrase used by him) with me, saying I was one of the two people he had ever told. In the final week of fieldwork, I asked him to take a group photo of the class I taught. After seeing the picture he had taken, I casually commented that it looked a bit dark and unclear. His reaction was immediate and intense - he became furious, shouted, swore at me, and said he regretted our relationship and would never speak to me again. I remember feeling deeply awkward, especially with other students present, as well as feeling guilty for unintentionally offending him and also hurt by his response. This incident arisen from my informal interaction with Luo Cheng required heightened emotional work not only because I was insulted but also because I experienced the discrepancy between the public performance as being a rational, professional and emotionally stable adult teacher/researcher and my private self-consciousness and emotional feelings (Scott et al., 2012).

This incident demonstrates a contingent conflict I had to deal with while in the field which I had not anticipated. Beyond that, such interpersonal contingencies are also beneficial for me to understand the relational concept of recognition in my study. I interpret both of our reactions as rooted in feelings of disrespect. For Luo Cheng, my comment may have invalidated a personal skill - photography that he valued as one of his strengths. It can be assumed that he may not have such an intense reaction if it had been a comment on other attributes such as his academic performance. This highlights how students used alternative frameworks of value and recognition, in which non-academic attributes played a crucial role. For me, the verbal insult felt like a rejection of me as a person of dignity and integrity and the denial of the trustworthy relationship we had built.

Apart from negative feelings, positive emotional experiences also deepened my insights into intersubjective recognition. Several months after I left the field, a few participants, including Luo Cheng, contacted me to request a photo of myself to include in a "photo wall of 2023", following a trend on *Kuaishou*. Receiving such a request was emotionally touching, and I interpreted it as a gesture of relational affirmation. My emotional response reinforced my own sense of being valued and appreciated and it shows how intersubjective recognition flows in both directions.

These relational experiences in fieldwork highlight that emotional work and exchanges can serve as a methodological lens through which to understand the relational concepts, such as recognition in my study (Schmidt et al., 2024). As illustrated by these two examples, these emotional exchanges, both disrespectful and affirming, have deepened my understanding of how interpersonal recognition - both its presence and absence - shapes experiences of self-worth for both participants and the researcher. It thus suggests that the understanding of the workings of such relational concepts can be accessed not only through investigating participants' experiences, but also through the researcher's own emotional involvement with them.

4.7 Leaving the field

Leaving the field is often emotionally and methodologically challenging in ethnographic research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). I stayed in the school until the end of the academic term, which provided a natural and structured endpoint for my fieldwork. While this timing helped bring closure, the process of leaving was still difficult. I had mixed

feelings: sadness about saying goodbye to the students I had come to know well, but also a sense of relief from the physical and emotional exhaustion that came with sustained field immersion.

However, my engagement with participants did not end with my departure. As is common in ethnographic research, some connections continued after I left the field. As mentioned earlier, some students contacted me to ask for a photo of me so they could include it in a "photo wall of 2023". On New Year's Day, several sent messages wishing me a happy New Year. One participant, who now works in a factory in a major city, has been sharing life updates with me and told me that our conversations continued to mean a lot to him. These moments have demonstrated the deep and affective ties that ethnographic work can foster.

These experiences have also made me reflect on the question: *do we ever leave the field* (Tickle, 2017)? While fieldwork may have a defined endpoint in terms of time and location, the relationships, emotions and responsibilities that emerge often persist beyond it. Moments of continued contact as mentioned suggest that the field is not simply a physical space we exit, but a relational space that can continue to shape us and be shaped by us. As a novice ethnographer, I learnt not only how to navigate complex field relations, but also formed connections that extended beyond the study itself. To me, such connections have formed one of the most rewarding parts of the research.

4.8 Data analysis approach

Data were analysed using NVivo, a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), which supported the systematic organisation of qualitative data and facilitate rigour and reliability in the research process (Tummons, 2014). The data imported into NVivo included interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and summaries of online content. Due to the large volume of visual material collected from participants' online activities (totalling over one thousand images), I chose not to import the full dataset into NVivo, as this could risk performance issues and potential software crashes. Instead, I created separate Word documents for each participant's online content, translating the visual material into textual descriptions. This involved documenting key features of each image, including visual elements and accompanying captions. For example, one screenshot of their post might be described as: an in-mirror selfie with a tattoo on his arm, captioned "cannot be a god in heaven, but I can be a *jingshen* guy". I also compiled a brief summary of each participant's

online posts as a preparatory step for analysis. This approach reflects my analytical focus on identifying recurring patterns in visual content, rather than evaluating artistic composition. The transcription process not only made the data more manageable but also deepened my familiarity, which proved valuable in the later stages of analysis. Throughout the coding process, I regularly revisited the original images to ensure the nuances of visual representation were captured in the research analysis.

To interpret patterns of meaning-making and shared experiences among participants, I employed reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). This approach was well-suited to the study's aim of exploring young people's lived experiences and the cultural meanings embedded in their everyday practices, situated within broader socio-cultural contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Thematic analysis offered a flexible yet robust framework for analysing participants' narratives, while also recognising the subjectivity and reflexivity of the researcher in the research process.

I followed the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022): familiarising myself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining them, defining and naming themes, and finally writing up. This was not a linear process but a recursive one, involving continuous movement between phases. While the analysis was primarily inductive, allowing an open-coding process and themes to develop from the data without pre-imposed categories, I also incorporated deductive elements, informed by the study's theoretical framework, to ensure the coding remained meaningful and relevant to the research questions (Byrne, 2022; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). To prevent theoretical expectations from over-determining the data, I engaged in iterative memoing throughout the analysis, while regular debriefing with supervisors provided opportunities to reflect on emerging interpretations and enhance analytic transparency. This iterative approach maintained a balance between theory-informed interpretation and data-grounded insight, ensuring that participants' voices remained central to the analysis.

Table 4 Examples of deductive and inductive codes

Theory-driven codes (deductive)	Data examples
Negative feelings (from experiencing disrespect)	*"On the way back to the school, Zuo Lang mentioned several times that he didn't want to return. He said being at school felt even worse than being in prison."* (fieldnote) *"I feel awful and embarrassed when I'm punished by teachers."* (interview)
The importance of datafied/quantitative recognition	*"In the Labour Skills class, Zhang Mili asked me to check her Kuaishou to see how many likes she had received. It was clear that she cared a lot about the number of likes."* (fieldnote) *"Every time I post something, I immediately exit Kuaishou and give the phone back to my parents. When I check again next time and see '99+' notifications, I feel a sense of joy, like I've become popular."* (interview)
Data-driven codes (inductive)	**Data examples**
Online-offline (dis)connection	*"I post more smoking videos on Kuaishou, but at school I don't dare to smoke openly. I feel like the 'me' on Kuaishou is more luan than the 'me' at school."* (interview; translated from Chinese) *"The groups of peers who hang out together at school also interact actively on Kuaishou by posting pictures of themselves together and liking and commenting on each other's content."* (fieldnote)
Self-defined youth style	*"My mother doesn't allow me to wear colourful or flashy clothes. When I see them [his peers] wearing that kind of colourful, flashy style, I feel a sense of admiration."* (interview) *"I also asked them why they liked having tattoos. Sometimes they didn't even know the meaning, like the line on their fingers, but they told me it's very cool and used for zhuangbi [showing off/acting cool]."* (fieldnote)

The first phase was relatively straightforward: I listened to interview recordings multiple times and transcribed all interviews manually. I also read and re-read all textual and visual data to immerse myself fully. My initial attempts at coding and theme development led to broad summaries of data domains, rather than patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organising concept (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Over time, as I gained a deeper understanding of the data, engaged with good practice examples in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022; Trainor & Bundon, 2021) and experimented with manual coding (which was later transferred into NVivo), I began to develop more interpretive and

analytically meaningful codes and (sub)themes. Aligned with the research questions, the themes generated from data analysis fall broadly into three categories: themes related to students' schooling experiences, themes concerning their digital engagement, and themes exploring the interplay between their online and offline social worlds. To support theme development and visualise relationships between themes and subthemes, I also created a mind map as shown in appendix 4.

4.9 Chapter summary

As Hertz (1997) argues, researchers must not only report findings but also reflect critically on the processes through which knowledge is constructed. In this chapter, I have provided a reflexive account of the methodological choices underpinning the study and discussed how my presence, positionality, and shifting roles in the field shaped both the relationships I formed and the data I collected. While my prior familiarity with the setting facilitated access and rapport, it was crucial to re-enter the field with a critical lens, remaining alert to my presumptions, emotions, and the power dynamics in the field. Reflexivity also extends to ethical practice (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), and I have addressed key ethical issues and my approach to navigating them in the chapter.

In conclusion, this chapter has outlined the methodological framework of the study, which employed an ethnographic approach to explore students' schooling experience and digital practices on *Kuaishou*. By combining offline and online methods, the study was able to examine the interplay between students' physical and digital lives. The integration of observational, interview, and visual data provided a nuanced understanding of how young people navigate their everyday experiences within broader socio-cultural and institutional contexts. The following chapters present the analysis and discussion of the empirical data collected through this methodological approach.

Chapter 5 Experience of disrespect at school

Chapter overview

This chapter explores participants' schooling experiences, focusing on how intersubjective relationships at school shape their sense of self. The analysis draws on Honneth's theory of recognition, particularly how failures in recognition are experienced as forms of disrespect, as outlined in Chapter 3. I begin by examining the dominant structures of recognition within the school context and how these structures reinforce particular norms, expectations and hierarchies. These serve as the backdrop against which students experienced various forms of disrespect. I then identify three recurring patterns through which students experienced this lack of recognition: (1) lack of care and instances of abuse; (2) unequal treatment; and (3) feelings of being undervalued. Finally, I consider the implications of these experiences, especially in terms of students' emotional suffering and the development of their identities within the school environment.

5.1 Who is recognised at school?

Schools are widely understood as key sites through which students gain recognition and achieve self-realisation, however it has been argued that such recognition is not achieved uniformly across all students (Moensted, 2022). This is related to the school system's construction of "a normative view of the 'exemplary pupil'" (Bates, 2019, p. 701), which shapes how students are evaluated, how they are positioned by teachers and how they relate to one another. The existence of a standardised model of "being a student" means that those who deviate from this ideal are often less likely to be recognised as valuable or competent individuals. This section examines the dominant recognition order in the school, focusing on who is affirmed and who is left feeling overlooked or marginalised in everyday school life.

Terms such as *hao xuesheng* ("good students"), *cha/huai xuesheng* ("bad students"), and *luan* ("disorderly" or "chaotic") were frequently used by participants to describe themselves or others. These terms reflect a widely shared classification system through which students were sorted and perceived. Here are some examples from students' accounts:

> *Huai xuesheng* ("bad students") are those who do not finish homework and have low scores. (Xiao Ying)

People who do not know me well tend to think I'm a bad student because I'm not obedient, often smoke, fight, drink, and even play truant. (Xiaoshuai)

Good students have high attainment, and bad students have low attainment. (Apple)

These narratives highlight two main criteria by which students are categorised and judged: academic performance and behavioural conformity. These labels are culturally embedded in the local context and are used by teachers to categorise students, and now also adopted and reinforced by students themselves.

Drawing from interviews and field observations, students labelled as *hao xuesheng* (good students) are generally those who achieve highly in academic results and comply with institutional norms. They follow school rules, participate in lessons and behave in ways that meet adult expectations. In contrast, *cha* or *huai xuesheng* (bad students) are featured by disengagement from schoolwork and their transgressive behaviours, such as smoking, fighting or truancy that challenge institutional regulation. Importantly, academic performance and behavioural conformity are often intertwined. Low-achieving students are more likely to engage in rule-breaking behaviour, whereas high-achieving students tend to conform more closely to expectations. However, as I will discuss in the next chapter, there are important exceptions which I term "silent conformity", referring to students who, despite struggling academically, maintain a quiet, rule-abiding presence in the classroom.

As the labels themselves suggest, terms like "good students" carry positive affirmation, while labels such as *cha/huai* (bad) or *luan* (chaotic/disorderly) have strongly negative connotations, positioning students as inferior or problematic. This evaluative framework informs how teachers perceive and interact with students in everyday school life, as illustrated in the following quotations from interviews:

Sometimes, teachers look down on us if our grades aren't good. They feel like we are all *cha xuesheng* (bad students) who are troublesome and *luan* (chaotic/disorderly). (Li Susu)

Teachers always hang out with *hao xuesheng* (good students) and I feel it, more, that I am ignored at school. (Liu Shi)

I want to learn, but the teachers only like those good students so I don't want to study after a few times of witnessing such partiality. (Miao Han)

These accounts suggest that the ways students were viewed and treated by teachers were shaped by narrow, institutionally defined norms of success and compliance. These norms guided the teachers' evaluations of student performance and also conditioned the interpersonal recognition teachers extended to students. It means that recognition in this setting was selectively granted to those who conformed to institutional rules and expectations. As a result, students who fail to meet such standards are less visible or valued in everyday interactions with teachers. The feelings of being "looked down on", "ignored", or experiencing "partiality" from teachers will be explored further in the next section.

Given this study's focus on academically marginalised youth, it is unsurprising that nearly all participants described themselves as "bad students" within the school setting. The above accounts provide a glimpse into how these labels impact their everyday experiences in the context of teacher-student relationships. In the following sections I will present three forms of disrespect as experienced by participants. They are organised into three themes: (1) lack of care and instances of abuse; (2) unequal treatment and (3) feelings of being undervalued. As shown in Table 4, these three forms of disrespect are linked to three modes of recognition and the dimensions of self-relations they shape. For each form of disrespect, several subthemes have been identified, which I will now discuss in detail.

Table 5 Forms of disrespect observed in the data, in relation to three modes of recognition and self-relations

Modes of recognition	Self-relations	Forms of disrespect	
Love	Self-confidence	Lack of care and instances of abuse	Indifference and neglect
			Corporal punishment and abuse
Rights	Self-respect	Unequal treatment	Unequal distribution of resources and punishment
			Physical and social segregation
			The deprivation of basic rights
Solidarity	Self-esteem	Feelings of being undervalued	Low expectations and distrust in academic abilities
			Negative labelling
			Devaluation of non-academic ways of living

5.2 Experience of disrespect

5.2.1 Lack of care and instances of abuse

Among three modes of recognition, love is the most fundamental and primary relationship, involving the need for recognition of one's own existence. As Honneth (1995) explains, "for Hegel, love represents the first stage of reciprocal recognition, because in it subjects mutually confirm each other with regard to the concrete nature of their needs and thereby recognise each other as needy creatures" (p. 95). Through loving and supportive relationships, individuals develop self-confidence, and the absence or destruction of such recognition can cause profound harm to one's self-concept.

In the school context, such relationships of care and emotional affirmation appeared to be rare from the perspective of the students in this study. Their accounts show a lack of supportive engagement from teachers. This section explores two key themes through which

students experienced the absence of this foundational form of recognition: indifference and neglect, and corporal punishment and abuse.

Indifference and neglect

One participant, Zhaocai, described his relationship with teachers as distant:

> Yuanya: How is your relationship with your teachers?
>
> Zhaocai: Quite good with Teacher Y, but I don't even want to say a word to the other teachers.
>
> Yuanya: Why is that?
>
> Zhaocai: The other teachers only talk to you about studies and nothing else.
>
> Yuanya: So, if a teacher wants to talk to you, it's generally about your studies?
>
> Zhaocai: If I haven't done anything wrong, the teachers usually don't talk to me.

Zhaocai's account shows that he received little attention from most teachers unless he did "something wrong", which in this context refers to rule-breaking or disruptive behaviours. However, such attention is not caring but often punitive and thus undesirable.

Similarly, Miao Han reported experiences of indifference received from her teacher:

> Sometimes when I ask them [the subject teacher] questions, they respond indifferently. Last time, I raised my hand in class because I knew the answer, but they ignored me. After that, I became increasingly reluctant to attend their class.

Miao Han also described the behaviour of a school leader, Ms. P, contrasting how she was treated compared to a high-achieving student:

> On one occasion, I was just walking in the corridor when Ms. P saw me and scolded me. During the first year, I was walking with another girl whose academic results ranked at the top. When Ms. P saw us, she only spoke warmly to the other girl. This partiality is evident throughout the entire school.

This narrative highlights the intersubjective nature of recognition within the school setting. Miao Han's experience shows that teachers and school leaders actively construct and reinforce social hierarchies through their everyday interactions with students. In doing so,

they reassert the dominant standards of "being a student" within the school. The scolding Miao Han received, contrasted with the warm greetings offered to the high-achieving student, exemplifies how recognition - and the withholding of it - is enacted interpersonally. Notably, the intentional invisibility conveyed through Ms. P's performative behaviour signals to Miao Han that she has been deliberately ignored, rather than a simple matter of physical invisibility, which is framed by Honneth (in Honneth & Margalit, 2001) as a morally significant form of disregard. Moreover, the fact that this memory remained vivid for Miao Han a year later highlights the lasting impact of such moral injuries. These are not fleeting moments of discomfort but enduring experiences of disrespect that shape how students come to see themselves and their place in the institutional order.

Importantly, such neglect is not random but selectively directed towards low-achieving students, producing a recognitional divide. Through these interactions, powerful messages are communicated about who is seen as deserving of care and attention, and who is not. Such interpersonal encounters not only reflect school values, but they also reproduce them in lived, relational terms.

Honneth (1995) primarily discusses love as the foundational mode of recognition within the parent-child relationship, where caregivers provide emotional security and affirmation. In the context of a boarding school, however, teachers take on intensified caregiving responsibilities, given the extensive time students spend in the institutional setting. The need for consistent care and emotional support from teachers becomes crucial. Yet, as shown through Zhaocai and Miao Han's accounts, students labelled as "bad" are routinely met with indifference, disregard or even hostility from teachers. This relational deficit will hinder the development of self-confidence and reinforce these students' marginalised status within the school.

Corporal punishment and abuse

In addition to the lack of care, corporal and humiliating punishment by teachers was not uncommon in the school. According to China's Compulsory Education Law, the use of corporal punishment is strictly prohibited (Ministry of Education, 2006). In casual conversations with the teaching staff, many of them acknowledged that corporal punishment was illegal. However, they continued to justify its use as an efficient method for correcting students' behaviour and improving academic outcomes. Based on students' accounts and

field observations, students were typically punished in two main situations, which align with the institutionalised categorisations of "good students" and "bad students": their low academic performance and non-conforming behaviours.

The following student narratives show how failure to meet academic expectations often led to corporal punishment:

> It was that time when I was absent and did not submit my homework. [The teacher] called me to their office the next day, asked me to bend over, and hit my buttocks with a stick until the stick broke. (Liu Shi)

> The teacher said if we scored less than 60 points in the final exam, we would be hit as many times as the points we lacked. I got around 20 points that time and was beaten by the teacher. (Zhaocai)

These accounts illustrate the treatment students received from their teachers when they failed to meet academic expectations. This was not an isolated incident with a single teacher but a normalised practice across the school, where corporal punishment was perceived as an effective means to enforce academic focus. Although this study did not investigate the teachers' perspectives, my informal interactions with them suggest that they tended to justify their actions with the belief that such measures were intended to facilitate students' academic progress.

Students also faced punishment for breaking school rules, administered by both teachers and the dorm supervisors. The unique role of the dorm supervisor became particularly evident as I observed in the field:

> The dorm supervisor in the boys' dorm seemed primarily responsible for monitoring the students' behaviour and punishing them if they misbehaved or disobeyed rules, such as eating or smoking in the dorm. He often yelled at them and sometimes resorted to physical punishment if they did something wrong. (Fieldnote, Wednesday, 28 June 2023)

This shows that students' behaviours were not only monitored in the classrooms but also extended to the dormitories. Beyond the authority of teachers, dorm supervisors also appeared to possess legitimate rights to discipline students, as granted by the school.

Consequently, students faced multiple layers of surveillance and control from both teachers and dorm supervisors.

One salient example I observed involved a group of students being corporally punished in front of the office building. The teacher dormitory building where I lived was next to the office building, and I heard some noises late at night, after lights out in the student dorms:

> Late at night, about 10pm, I witnessed approximately 30 boys being punished in front of the office building. Despite the darkness, I could identify four to five teachers, including the dorm supervisor, who were taking turns whipping the students. The boys were forced to crawl on all fours, and those who failed to maintain the required position were beaten more harshly. I later learned that these students had been involved in a group fight in the toilet. I overheard the teachers shouting, "Will you dare to do it again?" to which the students responded, "No, I won't." This so-called "educational" process continued until midnight. (Fieldnote, Wednesday, 28 June 2023)

Such bodily punishment, while viewed by the school authorities and teachers as a legitimate pedagogical tool, result in physical pain and public humiliation. The practices including forcing students to crawl, hitting them and demanding submissive verbal responses ("No, I won't") collectively reduced the students to objects of control and deprived them of agency and moral status. As Honneth (1992) notes, what is especially damaging in such acts is "the coupling of physical pain with the feeling of being defencelessly at the mercy of another subject, to the point of being deprived of all sense of reality" (p. 190). These experiences can destroy the student's self-confidence, a foundational layer of identity that develops through bodily trust and emotional security.

Such humiliating punishment is also reported by students when they were caught smoking in the school. For example:

> Yuanya: Have you ever been caught or punished before?
> Xiaoshuai: Yes, I was caught smoking by one of the school leaders. They forced me to lie on the stairs for an hour and made me smoke four cigarettes in a row without letting me spit them out. Another student, Wang Xu, had his mouth and nose stuffed with cigarettes, and the teacher used a cardboard box to cover his head, trapping him in the smoke.

> Yuanya: Have you ever been caught doing something forbidden?
>
> Luo Cheng: Smoking.
>
> Yuanya: How many times?
>
> Luo Cheng: Two or three times.
>
> Yuanya: How did you feel? Were you punished?
>
> Luo Cheng: The teacher took a pack of cigarettes, put five in our mouths, and one in each of our noses.

Again, these accounts reflect not only a breach of physical safety but also a type of disrespect that can have lasting damage to one's basic confidence. As Honneth (1995) contends, every attempt to gain control of a person's body against his or her will - irrespective of the intention behind it - causes a degree of humiliation that impacts more destructively than other forms of disrespect on a person's practical relation-to-self (p. 132). He further explains that "it is not solely the bodily pain as such, but the accompanying consciousness of not being recognized in one's own self-understanding that constitutes the condition for moral injury here" (Honneth, 1997, p. 23). The scope of corporal punishment extended beyond smoking or fighting to include being late to class, bringing a phone to school, not wearing the school uniform, engaging in romantic relationships, or sleeping during lessons. These collectively indicate how everyday acts of misalignment with school rules resulted in bodily penalties. Through Honneth's lens, these are more than disciplinary events but instead systematic disrespect and ongoing violations of physical integrity that can prevent the development of healthy self-understanding.

Within the context of a boarding school, where students spent most of their time away from family and where teachers were considered as primary adult figures, such experiences were particularly harmful. The absence of supportive, care-based relationships - what Honneth identifies as recognition through love - means that students were left without a stable foundation for building self-confidence. In such setting, the violation of bodily integrity is detrimental for the development of health self-relations.

5.2.2 Unequal treatment

The second level of recognition involves viewing oneself as a legal person with the same degree of rights as everyone else. Honneth (1995) defines the "possibility of relating

positively to oneself in this manner 'self-respect'" (p. 120). In this context, being excluded from certain rights affects an individual's moral self-respect and damages their social integrity. This section explores the extent to which this group of students was treated as equal right holders compared to their peers at school. The findings related to this aspect of disrespect mainly involve three areas: unequal distribution of resources and punishment; physical and social segregation; and the deprivation of basic rights.

Unequal distribution of resources and punishment

In interviews and informal conversations, students frequently described how "good students" were consistently prioritised in the allocation of school resources. For example,

> [The teacher] only gives the study materials to the best students first and ignores us. When there's only one copy, [the teacher] always gives it to the top student in the class. (Chen Rui)

> Last time our whole class was rewarded with some notebooks because of our good performance in the exam. After each student received one, there were a few notebooks left, and the teacher gave the rest to the good students. (Xiao Ying)

These examples illustrate a pattern of unequal material distribution shaped by an implicit assumption that high-achieving students are more deserving of support. The logic behind this may appear instrumental - teachers might assume that those students would make better use of educational resources, or they wanted to encourage other students to do better in the expectation of similar rewards, but what is more significant here is how this was received and perceived by other students. For students like Chen Rui, this unequal treatment reinforced a perception of exclusion and inferiority. Even when students noticed this unfairness, many chose not to speak up, fearing further marginalisation or humiliation.

Such unequal treatment also extended into disciplinary practices, where academic performance appeared to determine not just rewards but also the severity of punishment:

> [The teacher] only trusts the students with good grades, not us. For instance, if a good student doesn't finish their duty of cleaning the floor of the classroom, [the teacher] won't say anything. But [the teacher] always reprimands us and makes us do extra

cleaning or even hits us. Good students get preferential treatment, but we don't. (Miao Han)

The teachers are definitely partial to the girls and those with good grades. If they do something wrong, they just get a few words of criticism; but if it's *us at the back*, they will beat us. (Dai Peng, emphasis added to convey how this expression was uttered during interview)

Here, "*us at the back*" refers to low-achieving students who were usually seated at the rear of the classroom, as will be further discussed in the next section. These narratives point to a differential application of the school rules, where the same behaviour is judged and punished differently depending on the student's perceived academic status. According to Dai Peng, while "good students" may receive a verbal warning, others like him were subjected to corporal punishment, which he experienced as far more severe. This is consistent with the earlier discussion on how such punishment can disrupt one's fundamental relation to self by violating physical integrity. Although China's Compulsory Education Law explicitly prohibits all forms of corporal punishment in schools, students' experiences indicate that this legal protection was not applied equally. The right to bodily integrity - formally guaranteed by law - becomes, in practice, a privilege for a group of "good students". For students who fall outside this category, the law appears irrelevant thus undermining their ability to develop self-respect that comes from being treated as a subject of rights. The impact is not just a sense of unfair treatment, but a more profound feeling of exclusion from the community of rightful participants in the school. Consequently, many participants came to perceive themselves as less entitled than others.

Physical and social segregation

The phrase "us at the back", mentioned in the previous section, introduces the theme of physical segregation at school. Students frequently used "at the back" to refer to themselves and "at the front" to refer to "good students", reflecting the spatial arrangements in the classrooms. At school, students' navigational autonomy within the classroom space was highly restricted, particularly during teaching periods, as each student was assigned a fixed seat and expected to remain still and quiet while following the teacher's instructions. As observed and also reported by participants, there was a hierarchical structure evident in the spatial layout. This was illustrated by the following conversation:

Yuanya: Why are seats assigned based on grades?

Fang Yuan: It's the teacher's decision.

Yuanya: Do you think it's good?

Fang Yuan: We don't have a say in it.

Yuanya: But if it were up to you, would you want to sit in the last row?

Fang Yuan: I would definitely sit in the front row. You can't see anything from the last row.

This testimony shows an accepted lack of power in influencing decisions on one's own experience. Although some students expressed indifference about their seating location, a few participants, such as Feng Yuan would rather sit at the front, suggesting that he may not wish to be as disengaged as teachers might assume or perceive. While the next quotation further emphasises this, it also shows how the student submitted to the teacher's perception of them as "bad influences":

Yuanya: Do you ever want to sit at the front?

Zhang Mili: I considered it, but the teacher did not allow it. If I moved to the front, I would disturb the other students because I usually talk to others in class.

From the participants' perspectives, the seating arrangements were associated with students' academic attainment. High achievers typically occupied front or central positions, while low achievers were assigned to rear positions. Most participants in the study were seated at the back and seemed to have accepted this specific spatial arrangement. Consequently, the classroom seating order has been transformed into a symbolic hierarchy - a spatialised expression of value and status in the school system. In this hierarchy, being placed at the front signals competence and success. On the contrary, being placed at the back serves as a visible and embodied form of marginalisation, indicating failure, disengagement or deviance in the eyes of both teachers and peers. The classroom, therefore, becomes a strongly classified space, divided not only physically, but symbolically where students are sorted according to their academic attainment.

A similar practice was also observed in Zhang's (2021) ethnographic fieldwork in a Chinese suburban middle school where teachers used classroom seating arrangements as a pedagogical tool, deliberately manipulating the layout to reflect and reinforce a hierarchical learning environment. As mentioned earlier, students in this study used "students at the front"

as metaphors to refer to "good students" and "students at the back" to represent "bad students". These spatial labels demonstrate how institutional judgements become reproduced through everyday language and social practices.

The symbolic meanings attached to different seats were widely understood by teachers, students, and even parents. Ma Juan, during an interview, shared that she felt ashamed when one of her parents sat in her assigned seat during a parent meeting. These meetings often took place in students' classrooms, with parents asked to sit in their children's seats. Ma Juan's emotional feelings, as one implication of disrespectful experiences will be discussed in section 5.3.1. That this recognition order extended beyond the school walls and into the local community further reinforces how these spatial arrangements operate as a powerful mechanism of symbolic classification.

Another illustrative example is Wang Xu, who spoke about losing his "prime seat" right in front of the teacher's desk in the classroom. Although he would not be placed in the first row based on his academic performance, he occupied that seat for a specific reason (this detail is intentionally omitted to keep the student's anonymity). After he played truant once, he was moved to the third row as punishment. Wang Xu recalled telling himself: "one day I will get the seat back!" Interestingly, he had such a strong desire to get the seat back even though he was aware that he had not earned it through academic achievement like others sitting at the front. Wang Xu further explained that, when seated at the front, teachers would often ask him to run errands and include him in minor classroom responsibilities. After being moved, this role was passed to another student who took his place. It seems that for Wang Xu, the seat represented more than educational advantage but symbolised being trusted and valued by the teachers. The shift in seating may also alter how his peers perceived him, highlighting how a seemingly mundane aspect of classroom life - where one sits - can function as a visible marker of one's status in the school system.

There are two more examples of spatial segregation where students received some special treatment. In addition to the normalised seating arrangements, some students such as Zhang Zhen were assigned a special seat:

> Zhang Zhen: I used to sit at the front.
> Yuanya: When was that?
> Zhang Zhen: In the first year. I sat next to the teacher's desk.

Yuanya: Why were you placed in such a location?

Zhang Zhen: I wasn't paying attention in class, so the teacher moved me to that special seat.

Students were occasionally allocated special seats positioned adjacent to the teacher's desk to allow for closer monitoring of their behaviour during class. These students were often viewed as disruptive or at risk and were thus subject to heightened surveillance. Importantly, they had no say in these seating decisions, which were entirely at the teacher's discretion. This practice reflects what Catling (2005, p. 327) refers to as a "classroom power geography": a spatial order imposed on students that is ostensibly framed as supporting learning but, in practice, serves primarily to maintain teacher control over the environment and, by extension, over the students themselves.

Seating next to the teacher can be seen as a deliberate isolation of students as a means of behavioural control. Miao Han experienced similar treatment, though in a different form. While most students shared desks with a partner, Miao Han did not. She explained that the teacher believed placing her alone would reduce the likelihood of her being disruptive. This spatial decision, intended to maintain classroom discipline, had the unintended effect of deepening her social isolation and limiting opportunities for peer interaction. Such physical segregation was not limited to the classroom but extended into other aspects of school life, including dormitories and canteens. Dormitory assignments were typically based on entrance exam results, reinforcing a divide between high-achieving and low-achieving students. During my fieldwork, I also observed this separation reproduced informally in shared spaces such as the school canteen, where students' seating patterns mirrored classroom arrangements. Those seated at the back of the classroom tended to cluster together in the canteen as well. Although students had more freedom in choosing where to sit during meals, these choices still reflected the institutionalised divisions. It suggests that physical segregation within the school setting also functioned as a form of social segregation, shaping students' peer networks and the development of subcultural groupings - a theme explored in the next chapter.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the division of "key classes" and "non-key classes" is officially prohibited under China's Compulsory Education Law (Ministry of Education, 2006). While the school in this study did not formally categorise students in this way, the physical seating arrangements within classrooms served as similar function to ability grouping or tracking.

Research findings in the UK show that being placed in low-attainment groups often leads to a sense of subordination, exclusion and low status as well as a feeling of not being a legitimate member of the classroom community (Hargreaves et al., 2021; Hargreaves et al., 2019; McGillicuddy & Devine, 2020). Similarly, a study in China found that slow-tracked students had a significantly lower-level interpersonal trust relative to their fast-tracked peers (Li et al., 2018). While this study does not focus on a comparison between different student groups, it examines how such spatial experiences may shape students' development of self-identity, an issue explored further in section 5.3.2. What is important to highlight here is that institutionalised spatial practices, often being normalised, play a powerful role in structuring students' everyday experiences at school, influencing not only how they are positioned by others but also how they come to see themselves.

The deprivation of basic rights

In more extreme cases, students were deprived of their basic right to education. During fieldwork, I observed one such instance involving Xiao Ying who was expelled from the classroom due to her poor grade in an exam. She scored 8 out of 100 in the mid-term exam and, according to her account, the subject teacher responded by physically abusing her including slapping and beating her in front of the class and subsequently banning her from attending future lessons. This incident illustrates a dual violation: first, the use of corporal punishment constituted a direct assault on her physical integrity; second, the denial of classroom access effectively deprived her of her legal right to education. In doing so, Xiao Ying was perceived not as a student in need of academic support but as someone undeserving of educational provision, likely contributing to her loss of trust in her own abilities.

Another example came from Wang Xu, who shared that he had once been denied the right to get medical treatment. After injuring his leg on a piece of splintered wood from his chair, he asked to take time off. The teacher dismissed his request, accusing him of exaggerating the pain and telling him to wait until the end of the week when the school finished. This refusal reflected the teacher's lack of concern grounded in suspicion, likely due to Wang Xu's history of once playing truant. The teacher's decision thus appeared less about the seriousness of the injury but more about mistrust and moral judgment.

Beyond these extreme cases, it was not uncommon for teachers to deny students some other basic rights - sometimes applying such measures to the whole class, but often targeting low-

achieving students as a form of discipline. These included searching students' backpacks or personal belongings without consent, restricting access to food or toilet use, and even confiscating or destroying personal items deemed prohibited on school premises such as mobile phones. While often justified as part of school discipline, these practices intruded on students' privacy, autonomy and sense of personal dignity.

In summary, the unequal treatment faced by students in this study can be grouped into three main areas: unequal distribution of resources, physical and social segregation, and the deprivation of basic rights. These practices represent violations of the equal treatment all students should be entitled to. When certain students are viewed as less deserving of rights and autonomy, such institutional judgements can foster enduring feelings of injustice and exclusion (Zurn, 2015).

5.2.3 Feelings of being undervalued

The third form of recognition depends on how the community values an individual's unique traits and abilities as contributions to societal goals. Honneth (1995) argues that a good society should have an open and pluralistic evaluative system where everyone has the opportunity to earn esteem through their contributions to society. Correspondingly, the third form of disrespect involves the devaluation of certain forms of life, which are regarded as inferior within a dominant value hierarchy. When specific lifestyles or traits are discredited, individuals engaged in those ways of living struggle to perceive their own lives as meaningful or worthy within the collective space. This can undermine their ability to see themselves as valued members of the community, thereby affecting their self-esteem. As Honneth (1995) states, this form of disrespect denies individuals the "social approval of a form of self-realisation that he or she had to discover, despite all hindrances, with the encouragement of group solidarity" (p. 134).

Earlier discussion in this chapter has shown that teachers in the study frequently relied on a narrow, singular evaluative framework, primarily centred on academic achievement, to determine which students were deemed worthy of recognition. Building on this, the current section examines how students' diverse personal attributes and skills were evaluated within the school context, and how these judgments contributed to the denial of the third mode of recognition. This form of disrespect was manifested in three interrelated ways: low

expectations and distrust in academic abilities, negative labelling, and devaluation of non-academic ways of living.

Low expectations and distrust in academic abilities

> Our teacher told us to stay at school [not dropping out] and behave well. [The teacher] wants us to behave at school, not to get into fights, and just to hand in our homework. In class, even if we don't understand the content, it's fine; we just need to sit properly and not sleep. [The teacher] says whether we understand or not is one thing, but we need to have a proper attitude. This is what [the teacher] expects from us… [The teacher] also says that what they expect from us is the highest level we can achieve. We can only reach this level; higher expectations are not realistic for us.

The above quotation is from Xiaoshuai, a 15-year-old boy who sat at the back of the classroom. He described how, for students like him, teachers' expectations were not centred on academic excellence, but rather on minimal behavioural compliance: staying in school, avoiding trouble, and completing basic tasks such as homework regardless of their quality. The teacher's assertion that this minimal standard was the "highest level" students like him could reach reflects a fundamental lack of belief and trust in their academic potential.

Xiaoshuai also shared another example that illustrates teachers' distrust in students' academic abilities:

> Xiaoshuai: But once you're labelled as a bad student, how can you change that? Every time we have exams, we just put in minimal effort. If you actually try and get a high score, the teachers would just assume you cheated and wouldn't give you the marks. It's tough being a bad student.
> Yuanya: Do you mean that if you actually do your best and score well, the teacher would be doubtful?
> Xiaoshuai: Yeah I know that teachers will say you've definitely cheated if you score high, so I don't take it seriously, just write down some random stuff in the exam and then hand it in.
> Yuanya: So you'd rather do it that way than being accused of cheating?
> Xiaoshuai: Yeah. Being a bad student is actually pretty hard.

Xiaoshuai's account shows that even if he were to try and succeed in exams, his efforts would be dismissed as dishonest, discouraging him from attempting improvement in the first place. The anticipation of disbelief and accusation he received from teachers undermines the motivation to engage.

A similar experience was shared by another participant Zhang Mili:

> Zhang Mili: If we perform well in the [subject] test, the [subject] teacher says we're cheating.
> Yuanya: So the [subject] teacher just assumed that you cheated if you performed well on the test, regardless of the truth?
> Zhang Mili: Yes.

Similar to Xiaoshuai, Zhang Mili's performance in a [subject] test was immediately dismissed as cheating by her teacher. In both cases, students found their academic abilities being constantly underestimated and distrusted by teachers, regardless of their actual performance.

These experiences illustrate how teachers' low expectations and lack of trust on students can lead to students' disengagement from academic work. When students believe their efforts will not be trusted or rewarded, they may feel little motivation to invest in their studies. This can help perpetuate the very stereotypes held by teachers through creating a vicious cycle: teachers' low expectations and distrust can discourage students from trying, and students' resulting disengagement appears to validate the teachers' assumptions of them.

More than just a lack of confidence in students' abilities, this persistent distrust functions as a powerful signal of how students are positioned from teachers' perspective - not as capable learners, but as individuals with a lack of potential whose academic efforts are inherently suspect. This intersubjective positioning conveys to students that they occupy a devalued place in the classroom, shaping how they come to see themselves. Such perceptions can damage the development of a positive relationship with oneself, as students begin to view their abilities and value through the lens of the teachers' negative judgments, rather than as individuals with the capacity to grow and succeed.

Negative labelling

When asked how their teachers perceived them, many students responded with terms such as "bad" and *luan* (chaotic/disorderly), which, as noted at the beginning of this chapter were the most common labels they believed teachers would use to describe them. In some cases, students mentioned even harsher terms, as shown in the following conversations:

> Yuanya: What do you think your teachers think of you?
>
> Zuo Lang: *Zhazha*.
>
> Yuanya: What do you mean by that?
>
> Zuo Lang: Terrible, you know.

> Yuanya: How do you think your teachers would describe you?
>
> Kaixin: *Luan* [chaotic/disorderly], and something like *laoshu shi* [rat shit]
>
> Miao Han: Just like shit, *zha wa po* [local dialect].
>
> Yuanya: What do you mean by that?
>
> Kaixin: Just being *luan* and very loud…

The derogatory language described above goes beyond expressions of disapproval; it is a form of humiliation. For instance, *zhazha*, mentioned by Zuo Lang, is a term that means "residue" or "dregs" in Chinese. When applied to a person, it implies that they are of little or no value. Similarly, the phrase *laoshu shi* ("rat shit") and *zha wa po* (local dialect containing seriously derogatory insult) convey disgust and rejection. In English, the expression "rotten apple" is often used to describe someone who spoils the group. In Chinese, the phrase *laoshu shi* ("rat shit") carries the same meaning in the idiom "a piece of rat faeces spoiled the whole pot of soup", which metaphorically suggests that one 'bad' individual can contaminate an entire group.

These labels provide strong evidence that, in the eyes of the teachers, these students were viewed as worthless or detrimental to the community. In this way, such labels not only demean this group of students but also fundamentally question their existence within the school environment. They were not merely seen as struggling or underperforming; they were positioned as disruptive and undeserving of inclusion. Moreover, equating students to residue or rat shit signifies significant devaluation of their role and capabilities, and can severely undermine students' potential to contribute positively to the school and the wider society.

According to Honneth (1995), these experiences constitute a violation of self-esteem: "when one experiences oneself as being of lower social value than one had previously assumed" (pp.

137-138). With little recognition granted to their potential for positive contribution to the school community, they were effectively marginalised as subordinate and inferior members in the school system. This can largely threaten their dignity and emotional well-being.

Finally, it is important to note that such labelling was often tied to a broader disregard for students' non-academic strengths and alternative ways of being. The next section will explore how students' non-academic attributes were devalued or ignored, further deepening the sense of inferiority they experienced.

Devaluation of non-academic ways of living

According to Honneth (1995), self-esteem is developed not through fixed or general standards, but through recognition of an individual's unique traits and contributions. However, in this study, students' non-academic abilities and interests were rarely valued by their teachers. These attributes were often dismissed because they did not align with the dominant academic standards through which teachers judged the students' worth.

The case of Xiao Ying illustrates how this form of interpersonal disrespect operates in practice:

> Xiao Ying: More than a year ago, I wanted to be an athlete, but they told me that girls shouldn't do that, so I gave up. Now I have not trained for a long time and can't run fast anymore. I also wanted to practise singing, but they called me crazy.
> Yuanya: Why?
> Xiao Ying: They [Teachers and parents] don't understand.
> Yuanya: Have you ever participated in singing competitions or performances?
> Xiao Ying: I prefer to learn by myself. I really like singing and sports, but they don't support me. They don't let me develop my interests and hobbies; they just want me to study. Apart from studying, they don't want me to do anything else. I used to like running, but now I don't run anymore. I like singing, but they say singing is only for crazy people.

Xiao Ying's experience demonstrates teachers' and other adults' devaluation of non-academic talents and skills. Because her interests in sports and music did not contribute to academic development, they were dismissed as unimportant or even irrational. The comment

that "singing is only for crazy people" reflects more than a lack of support; it constitutes a moral judgment that frames such interests as socially unacceptable or meaningless.

This was not unique to Xiao Ying. Zhang Mili also shared a strong interest in music but received little support and was met with indifference or rejection from the adults around her. Their experiences reflect a pattern in which the dominant academic culture shaped how teachers interpreted and responded to students' non-academic qualities. Talents in sports, music, or other areas were treated as irrelevant or even problematic, because they did not align with what was viewed as a legitimate attribute. Rather than recognising these traits as meaningful or valuable, teachers often saw them as distractions or signs of failure. This lack of recognition sent a clear interpersonal message to students like Xiao Ying and Zhang Mili: their non-academic interests and abilities were not worth pursuing and did not deserve support.

As discussed in Chapter 1, this narrow focus on academic success is closely linked to dominant cultural norms in China, particularly the belief that educational achievement is a necessary - or the best - path to upward mobility, especially for students from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds. Almost all participants in the study expressed that doing well at school was important for securing a "good job" in the future. A good job, in their view, was understood not only in terms of a decent salary, but also in its association with non-manual, office-based work – roles that were considered more socially dignified than manual labour, such as farming or factory work, in which many of their parents were involved.

> Yuanya: What do you think is the purpose of studying?
> Zeng Kai: Studying is for finding a better job.
> Yuanya: What is a better job?
> Zeng Kai: Less manual labour, less tiring and more money.
>
> Yuanya: Do you think studying is important or not?
> Zuo Lang: It is important. Because if you don't study, you will be a failure when you grow up - You'll just end up staying at home every day, taking care of pigs and cattle.

These responses highlight two important points. First, students believed a strong link between academic performance and access to future opportunities. Second, they regarded intellectual work as superior to manual labour. Yet, as low-achieving students, many of them were aware

that they were unlikely to follow the academic path and attain the qualifications required for office jobs. Nevertheless, their desire for non-manual, higher-status work reflects more than just a hope for better material conditions. While salary is certainly one factor - since intellectual jobs are often associated with more stable and decent pay, this aspiration also signals a wish to avoid the kinds of interpersonal disrespect they had already encountered in school. In this sense, their hope for a non-manual job can be interpreted as a refusal to allow the devaluation they experienced in the classroom to continue into their future lives, and as an expression of their desire for greater respect and dignity.

As Honneth (1995) argues, a lack of recognition can undermine an individual's ability to view their own way of life as socially meaningful. For students like Xiao Ying and Zhang Mili, the persistent dismissal of their non-academic abilities received from teachers and other adults can weaken their ability to view these traits as worthy or valuable. These experiences of interpersonal disrespect can not only cause emotional pain but also gradually erode their self-esteem, reinforcing the perception that they were less valued individuals in the eyes of others. The implications of such disrespectful experiences will be explored in the following section.

5.3 Implications of disrespectful experiences

The previous sections centred on three forms of disrespect that students in the study experienced at school. This section will explore the implications of such experiences, particularly in relation to emotional suffering and self-identity.

5.3.1 Emotional sufferings

"The core of moral injuries is located in the refusal of recognition" (Honneth, 1997, p. 27). As Honneth (1995) argues, when individuals' expectations for recognition are not fulfilled, they experience disrespect, often resulting in emotional pain such as hurt feelings or resentment. These feelings can serve as important indicators of where recognition is withdrawn in interpersonal relationships. This section explores the emotional sufferings experienced by students as a reflection and implication of the lack of recognition they received from their teachers.

While some participants acknowledged that school could offer opportunities for socialising with peers, many expressed negative sentiments about their day-to-day experiences. Two

phrases from the local dialect, *nanzai* (feeling awful and restless) and *gaochang buyou* (having nothing meaningful to do), were frequently used by students to capture the emotional texture of their school lives. These expressions demonstrate a strong sense of frustration and dissatisfaction.

> Yuanya: What do you mean by *gaochang buyou*?
>
> Miao Han: It just means you have nothing to do except study. The teacher scolded us again last night, saying that we ran faster than anyone else when the class was over.

> Yuanya: What is your least favourite part of school?
>
> Dai Peng: Attending classes.
>
> Yuanya: But classes occupy most of the time at school, don't they? How do you feel about it?
>
> Dai Peng: Very, very *nanzai* [feeling awful and restless]. But you have to stay still until the break. I rushed to the toilet during the break to vent.

These conversations demonstrate common emotional responses among students - boredom, restlessness and a lack of motivation. While such feelings may partly result from the demanding workload and long school hours, this section focuses on how interpersonal disrespect, particularly from teachers, contributed to these affective experiences. The scolding mentioned by Miao Han, and the frustration expressed by Dai Peng, though not stated explicitly in these excerpts, align with previous discussions about their marginal positions in the classroom. This marginalisation was not only spatial, as evident in where they were seated, but also relational. Teachers tended to pay them little positive attention, instead responding with discipline, punishment or low expectations regarding their academic potential.

This pattern of disregard likely played a central role in shaping their emotional expressions. The lack of recognition from teachers undermined their sense of belonging in the classroom and diminished their motivation. Both Miao Han and Dai Peng expressed strong desires to escape the classroom environment, which reflects a deep sense of alienation and emotional disconnection from formal learning.

My fieldnotes further captured how negative relationships with teachers contributed to emotional distress:

Zuo Lang used the phrase *nanzai* for many times to describe how much he hated being at school. He attributed his feelings primarily to the behaviour of certain teachers, particularly his [subject] teacher, whom he described as "crazy" because of their frequent scolding and physical punishments. He even used some insulting words to comment on [the teacher] and asked me to replace [the teacher]. He said he would try to kick their teacher out if I was willing to be their teacher. On the way back to the school after the interview, he said he didn't want to go back because staying at school was even worse than being in prison. (Fieldnote, Tuesday, 13 June 2023)

For Zuo Lang, the emotional pain he experienced at school was directly linked to how teachers treated him. His frustration and resistance were related to his experiences of being constantly punished and misunderstood. While corporal punishment was widely normalised in the school, and some students even claimed to be used to it, Zuo Lang's words show that its emotional effects were still deeply felt. Comparing school to prison not only illustrates the strict control he experienced but also suggests a deep loss of dignity - being treated not as a person worthy of care and respect, but as someone to be controlled or punished. His resentment and emotional pain can be seen as indicators of the interpersonal disrespect he felt from teachers, which undermined both his engagement with schoolwork and his sense of self-worth.

Another form of moral injuries experienced by students involves public humiliation. Li Na recounted an incident that took place on a Friday afternoon during the school's regular flag-lowering ceremony, when all students and teachers assembled on the playground. On that day, one of the school leaders ordered all students who were not wearing school uniforms to come forward and stand on the stage. The school leader then loudly criticised them for their lack of discipline and poor manners, framing their behaviour as disrespectful to school regulations. Li Na, one of the students singled out, described feeling "really, really bad" and embarrassed while standing in front of the entire school:

Yuanya: How did you feel when you were called out on Friday?
Lin Na: I felt really bad inside and was thinking, why didn't I wear my uniform?
Yuanya: Why didn't you wear it?
Lin Na: I did put it on, but then we had PE class. Wearing two layers was really stuffy, and the uniform was quite warm, so I took it off and wore my own T-shirt.

Yuanya: How did you feel when you were standing there?

Lin Na: It was really complicated. I felt really bad, and it was very embarrassing with so many people watching.

Yuanya: Then they asked you to stand at the school gate when everyone was leaving. How did you feel then?

Lin Na: I just felt really, really bad.

While discipline and order were frequently maintained by teachers and school authorities through punishments in various forms, often administered privately or in front of the class, Li Na's experience was an extreme example, as she had to face public shaming in front of the entire school. This level of exposure intensified her feelings of shame and humiliation, turning what might have been a routine disciplinary measure into a deeply hurtful event, as evidenced by her testimony.

Such incidents were not uncommon at school. Another example was observed during fieldwork, when students who were caught sneaking their mobile phones into the school - an explicit violation of school rules - were forced to destroy their mobile phones on the stage during a school-wide assembly. While it was intended as a public warning to reinforce discipline, the emotional impact on the students involved can be profound. These acts of public punishment reduced students to negative examples, subjecting them to collective judgment and emotional harm.

Public humiliation, in this context, constitutes a withdrawal of recognition particularly from teachers and school authorities. Arguably, these more visible or seemingly extreme incidents are not the only instances that can result in emotional suffering. As discussed in the previous sections, students experienced a persistent lack of care and attention, unequal treatment and the devaluation of their non-academic ways of living in interaction with their teachers. While not all participants articulated their emotional responses as explicitly as Zuo Lang or Li Na, their accounts of everyday school life still conveyed dissatisfaction, alienation and restlessness. As mentioned earlier, students often used local phrases such as *nanzai* and *gaochang buyou* to describe their feelings - terms that encapsulate emotional discomfort, frustration and restlessness. These emotional responses point to more than individual discontent; they reflect the moral injuries caused by interpersonal disrespect embedded in daily interactions at school. In this sense, the emotional sufferings students experienced serve

as both a consequence and a signal of the recognition they were denied in their routine engagement with teachers.

As Honneth (1995) notes, these feelings are not only signs of wounded dignity but can also become the motivational basis for resistance and struggles for recognition. The next chapter will explore how these experiences of disrespect motivated students to find ways, both explicit and subtle, in which they sought to reclaim dignity and assert their own sense of worth in the face of a dominant recognition structure that often excluded them.

5.3.2 Relational self-identity

Honneth's theory posits that recognition is foundational to the form and structure of identity. As Zurn (2015) explains, "only by taking up the perspective of others on oneself can one begin to develop a sense of who one is, of one's beliefs, desires, needs, inclinations, values and ideals (p. 27). In this view, identity is not constructed in isolation, but through a process of intersubjective recognition - one's self-understanding emerges from interaction with others whose perspectives are shaped by culturally specific norms, values and expectations. Thus, the way individuals come to view themselves is closely linked to the attitudes and judgments they perceive from their social environment.

Honneth emphasises that the denial of recognition - what he terms disrespect - can severely damage an individual's self-relation and autonomy. Anna (2018) captures this idea well, arguing that "the subject is so thoroughly dependent on social valuing for her/his very identity and developing self-relations, that negative assessment holds potential to directly undermine the subjective sense of self-worth" (p. 35). In the context of this study, the disrespect students experienced at school, particularly in interpersonal relationships with teachers (and some peers as illustrated later) had a tangible impact on their self-perception and sense of autonomy.

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, students frequently described themselves using terms such as *luan* or bad, mirroring the negative evaluative language often used by their teachers. For instance:

> Yuanya: What do you think of yourself as a student?
> Chen Rui: Not very *luan* right now. My academic grades are bad, but not very *luan*.

Yuanya: What do you think of yourself as a student?

Zhang Zhen: Both good and bad.

Yuanya: What's "good"?

Zhang Zhen: I don't fight with others.

Yuanya: How about "bad"?

Zhang Zhen: I don't concentrate in class and I sleep during class.

These examples show how students adopted the dominant evaluative framework at school, shaping their self-identity, at least within the school context according to how teachers typically assessed them. However, students' self-conceptions were not fixed or wholly negative. Several recognised that they were perceived differently depending on their relationships with others.

Zhaocai, for example, noted that while some classmates saw him as a "normal person", "good students" viewed him negatively, although he found it difficult to explain why. Similarly, Xiaoshuai described a dual perception in relation to others:

Yuanya: How do you think your classmates see you?

Zhaocai: In some people's eyes, I'm just like a normal person. But in the eyes of good students, I'm definitely not good.

Yuanya: Why do good students see you negatively?

Zhaocai: I cannot really explain, but I know in their eyes, I'm definitely not seen positively.

For those who know me and understand me, I'm just an average student. But in the eyes of those who do not know me, I'm seen as a bad student - someone who doesn't listen in class, skips class, smokes, fights and drinks - basically a kid who does bad things all the time. Especially for the ones who are good at studying, they would say I'm the most troublesome student in class. (Xiaoshuai)

These reflections highlight the relational nature of identity. Importantly, the judgments enacted by "good students" often mirrored the hierarchical recognition framework employed by teachers. This replication of dominant values among peers suggests that disrespect was not confined to formal authority figures but circulated more broadly within the student body.

This kind of interpersonal disrespect - both from teachers and "good students" - not only undermines psychological well-being but also violates the positive self-understandings that students may have developed in other social contexts. Yet, not all peer relationships were defined by this dominant evaluative lens. As both Zhaocai and Xiaoshuai noted, some peers saw them more positively or at least neutrally and such affirmation often came from peers who shared similar status and school experiences, as illustrated by the following conversations:

> Yuanya: What about your classmates? If I asked them to describe you in three words, what do you think they would say?
>
> Chen Rui: Very cheerful. Helps them when they're in trouble. Takes care of them.
>
> Yuanya: So you're someone who takes care of others?
>
> Chen Rui: Yes.

> Yuanya: How do you think other classmates see you?
>
> Zhang Mili: Let me guess how Ma Juan [another participant in the study who is her good friend] sees me. I can make her happy, keep her company, and include her in everything. She also shares her secrets with me, including the guys she likes, because she knows I won't tell anyone.

Although students often spoke about themselves using deficit-oriented language, these examples highlight moments when they described themselves as helpful, trustworthy, or caring - qualities recognised and valued by peers with whom they shared meaningful relationships. Unlike teachers and high-achieving students who tended to judge them through the lens of academic success, these peer relationships were based on different criteria that allowed students to feel seen and valued. This suggests that while marginalised students may be denied recognition from adults or certain peer groups, their friendships can offer alternative channels for mutual recognition and emotional support, which will be discussed in detail in the following chapters.

5.4 Chapter summary

This chapter examined the various forms of disrespect students experienced in their school lives, particularly in relation to teachers who assessed and judged them through the lens of the dominant evaluative framework. The presence of a standardised model of what it means

to be a "good student" meant that those who deviated from this ideal were less likely to be recognised as competent, worthy or valuable within the school context. Drawing on Honneth's three modes of recognition, I outlined three corresponding forms of disrespect: (1) lack of care and instances of abuse, (2) unequal treatment, and (3) feelings of being undervalued, as summarised in Table 5. Each category was further unpacked through subthemes grounded in students' narratives and ethnographic observations. A more in-depth discussion of these categories and how they intersect will be provided in Chapter 8.

This chapter also explored the implications of disrespect regarding students' emotional well-being and relational self-identity. As Honneth (1995) argues, emotional sufferings not only signal the withdrawal of recognition but can also become a motivational force for individuals to reclaim recognition necessary for sustaining a positive self-relation. While many participants were positioned negatively by teachers and some peers, the friendships they formed at school often offered an alternative recognition space, where their personal qualities and social contributions were acknowledged and appreciated. The following chapter will explore how these students actively drew on their peer relationships to counteract the harms of disrespect and assert alternative forms of value and identity.

Chapter 6: Constructing *luan* culture at school

Chapter overview

The previous chapter examined three forms of deficient recognition and disrespect experienced by a group of students at school, highlighting its impact on their self-relations. Building on this, the current chapter explores how students responded to their collective experiences of invisibility and exclusion. The findings show that students sought validation through peer relationships by developing a distinctive cultural identity that deviated from the dominant school culture. This countercultural development served as a strategy to counteract the negative effects of the dominant recognition structure and to foster a positive self-conception within their peer groups. Meanwhile, students continuously navigated power dynamics with school authorities, grappling with the paradox of seeking self-worth through a countercultural identity which simultaneously reinforced their exclusion. This chapter first examines the limited formal recognition available to students. It then explores how they developed a countercultural identity as an alternative mode of recognition through peer relationships. Following this, it discusses their negotiation with the dominant structure and two approaches they adopted including strategic and silent conformity.

6.1 Opportunities for formal recognition

As discussed in the previous chapter, the school's evaluative framework based on conformity and academic achievement served as the primary criteria for categorising students into two distinct groups: "good students" and "bad students". This binary classification is accompanied by an unequal distribution of recognition. While "good students" often received formal affirmation from teachers, those labelled as "bad students" are often perceived as less competent and less deserving of care and attention. However, this does not mean that the latter group was entirely devoid of opportunities for formal recognition. Some students reported occasional instances in which they received positive feedback from teachers, fostering a temporary sense of self-worth.

One such occasion, mentioned by several participants, relates to academic progress. When asked if he had ever experienced a sense of achievement, Zuo Lang recalled:

I received an improvement award last term from the [subject] teacher as I made progress in the [subject] exam.

Similarly, Kaixin expressed positive emotions when she felt valued by teachers:

When I got good results in exams or did something good, the teachers would give me sweets and encourage me - that's when I felt good about staying at school.

Beyond academic achievement, students also found moments of recognition in extracurricular activities, particularly during the annual school sports days. Several participants identified this as their favourite school event. Xiao Ying, who wanted to be an athlete as mentioned in the previous chapter, shared:

I like the sports days the most because I win prizes and get to *chucai* [shine] on that day.

The Chinese phrase *chucai* which I translated into "shine" in Xiao Ying's reply is often used to describe something outstanding or exceptional, such as a performance or a piece of writing. For students like Xiao Ying, sports days represented rare moments when their non-academic strengths were recognised and celebrated. Her athletic achievements, validated through awards, were seen by both teachers and classmates as valuable contributions to the class, especially since the sports day was framed as a competition between classes. However, Xiao Ying also pointed out a significant disparity in the school's recognition practices in public. The award ceremony, which took place during the parents meeting day, honoured only academic high achievers, excluding those who excelled in other domains such as sports. This omission again reflects the dominant recognition structure, where non-academic accomplishments remain peripheral and largely overlooked. It suggests that the *chucai* experiences for certain students are often marginal and limited to specific occasions, rarely translating into sustained recognition within the broader context of school life.

These findings not only highlight the rare opportunities for recognition available to non-academic students but also the significance of being seen and valued for them. This was also evident in my interactions with some participants, who actively sought validation from me by showcasing their non-academic talents. For instance, Luo Cheng frequently demonstrated his painting and basketball skills in my presence, seemingly awaiting some positive comments. However, it is important to point out that non-academic activities remained sporadic and

infrequent within an education system primarily focused on academic performance. Therefore, it can be argued that such limited opportunities for formal recognition - whether through occasional academic progress or rare extracurricular activities - were insufficient to counterbalance the frequent instances of disrespect and marginalisation experienced by students. The prominent emphasis on academic performance means that, for participants in the study, school interactions with teachers were primarily marked by disrespect and exclusion, as detailed in the previous chapter. Given the difficulty in navigating interpersonal relationships with teachers and challenging the established norms, a group of students have sought alternative forms of recognition through peer-to-peer relationships. The following sections explores how they have constructed an alternative framework of recognition through the formation of a collective identity centred around the concept of being *luan*.

6.2 Constructing the oppositional identity of *luan* at school

As discussed in the previous chapter, participants in this study were frequently labelled as "bad" and *luan* (chaotic/disorderly) at school. They, in turn, often adopted these terms to describe themselves, reflecting the evaluative language used by their teachers. The literal meaning of *luan* suggests behaviours that violate school rules and deviate from teachers' expectations, positioning these students as the antithesis of the ideal pupil. This *luan* (sub)culture functions as a collective identity that contains values and ideologies which differ from those promoted by the school and broader society yet hold significant meaning for the students themselves.

Several key characteristics of being *luan* are identified from students' accounts and my fieldwork observations including a distinctive style of appearance, "doing nothing" culture, and "doing something" culture within the school environment, as explained below.

6.2.1 Building stylistic differentiation

Being *luan* involves a distinctive style of appearance, carrying a symbolic meaning of being "cool" as perceived by most participants. Some of them stood out at school due to their unique ways of presenting themselves from others, often marked by their appropriation of materials and objects to shape their bodily and stylistic display.

Among all students, Zhaocai was one of the most identifiable individuals. In addition to the tattoos on his fingers - a common practice among participants - he had a diamond-shaped

tattoo on his forehead and a Chinese character meaning "emperor" on his neck. He also shared that he had a large three-faced Buddha image tattooed on his chest, which was verified as he often posted it on *Kuaishou* (see Post 1 in Chapter 7). A group of students, including Dai Peng, had geometric tattoos on their fingers, which he described as a response to popular trends among peers. The following interview excerpt illustrates this trend:

> Yuanya: Do you have any tattoos?
>
> Dai Peng: Just a small one here.
>
> Yuanya: Why did you get it?
>
> Dai Peng: Just following the trend - thought it looked cool.
>
> Yuanya: Did you tattoo it yourself?
>
> Dai Peng: Yeah. Some people use a tattoo machine. Others just poke with a needle and fill with ink.
>
> Yuanya: Why did you get these rectangular tattoos on your fingers? What do they mean?
>
> Dai Peng: Nothing, just following the trend.

My fieldnotes further document these observations:

> It was interesting to see that many of them have tattoos on their fingers and they all had similar tattoo patterns. I asked them why they liked having tattoos. Some of them could not articulate a clear reason, but others told me it was very cool and pretty - something to show off. (Fieldnote, Monday, 22 May 2023)

The term "tattoo" frequently appeared in their definitions of being *luan*. By perceiving having tattoos as a trendy practice, these students established the connection between tattoos and the symbolic value of being "cool". Historically, tattoos in Chinese culture have been linked to criminal punishment and marginalised social status (Carrie, 2000). Tattoos were also used by the Han majority to distinguish non-Han ethnic groups, reinforcing connotations of barbarism and incivility (Lei, 2009). The social stigma surrounding tattoos is further rooted in Confucian ideals, which view body modification as a violation of filial piety and an offense to one's parents (Carrie, 2000). Even today, tattoos in China remain associated with gang membership and underground societies (Boretz, 2011), despite emerging research suggesting a transition toward their acceptance as a modern fashion statement (MacFarlane, 2021; Shen, 2006). The state's attitudes toward tattoos are evident in media censorship policies, including

a recent ban on tattooed individuals appearing on traditional and online platforms (Amar, 2018). How students navigate these restrictions while still displaying their tattoos on social media will be explored in the next chapter. Their appropriation of tattoos can be understood as an inversion of what is deemed normal and acceptable in mainstream culture. While individuals like Zhaocai may have personal preferences regarding their tattoo designs, many participants, such as Dai Peng, perceived tattoos primarily as a marker of group identity. In other words, the content may not matter to them but the act of getting a tattoo is an in-group signifier which shows their commitment to the group.

Beyond tattoos, students also adopted other means to physically distinguish themselves from others. Some of them customised their school uniforms by drawing graffiti on it or putting on stickers. Sometimes they wore their own jackets instead of the school uniform or draped their uniform jackets over their shoulders rather than wearing it properly. Lin Na, who was publicly humiliated for not wearing her school uniform as discussed in the previous chapter, may have intended to stand out through this act, even though she claimed it was due to the hot weather. The following conversations demonstrated a few ways of stylistic differentiation, including dyed hair and their dressing style.

> Yuanya: Have you dyed your hair?
> Dai Peng: Yes, I dyed it in 7th grade. It was brownish yellow.
> Yuanya: Did you get punished at school for it?
> Dai Peng: No because you could only see it under the sun. When the teacher noticed and asked why I dyed my hair, I just said, "because it looks good" and they didn't say anything else.
>
> Yuanya: When did you become interested in fashion?
> Luo Cheng: The second term of my first year in middle school.
> Yuanya: Why?
> Luo Cheng: I felt that dressing stylishly would make more people notice me.
> Yuanya: So, more people would like you?
> Luo Cheng: Yeah.
> Yuanya: But you have to wear a school uniform at school, right?
> Luo Cheng: Yeah, so I buy trendy shoes instead.
> Yuanya: Oh, so people look at your shoes.

Luo Cheng: Yeah.

Dyed hair was not commonly seen at school as it was prohibited. Dai Peng did not get punished, likely because his hair colour was subtle. Another participant Liu Shi shared that he once dyed his hair a bright colour and received negative comments from people in his village, such as "Who is this kid? He looks miserable, definitely no hope for the future". This suggests a common attitude towards dyed hair in the local community. Besides hairstyles, the school's uniform policy also left little room for personal expression, although a few students, like Zhaocai, customised their uniforms or occasionally wore their own clothes. In the interview, Luo Cheng said that "more people would notice me" if he dressed fashionably, highlighting his desire for attention and how his distinctive physical appearance could serve as a means to achieve it.

Hebdige (1988) asserts that "youth culture as sign-system centres on the body" (p. 31), highlighting how appearance, posture, and style serve as crucial means for youth to articulate identity and distinction. In this sense, "one has somehow taken possession of one's body, which henceforth carries a visible sign of identity" (Featherstone, 1999, p. 2). For these students, expressive choices particularly body modification represent more than just fleeting fashion trends - rather, they serve as "an attempt to fix, or anchor one's sense of self through the (relative) permanence of the modification thus acquired" (Sweetman, 1999, p. 71). Participants in the study used their bodies as sites of play and experimentation, embracing what is typically prohibited or disapproved of by adult authorities. Among all stylistic choices, tattoos function as a relatively permanent marker of an expression of individualism (Sanders, 1988). As Hebdige (1988) further states, "(i)f teenagers possess little else, they at least own their own bodies. If power can be exercised nowhere else, it can at least be exercised here" (p. 31). In this context, body modification emerges as one of the few domains where students can assert autonomy and resist adult control. Their visual expressions, therefore, extend beyond mere aesthetics or fashion - they are, at their core, statements of attitude, agency, and resistance (Moore, 1994; Muggleton, 2000).

At the same time, such practices should also be understood as part of a broader landscape of youth culture. Youth subcultures have historically used stylistic expression as a way to negotiate identity, resist dominant norms and build alternative communities (Brake, 1973; Clarke et al., 2016). The cultural practices of these students resonate with this tradition, reflecting shared values and social affiliations. The visual signifiers they adopt including

hairstyles, clothing and tattoos carry meaning within their peer group because they express collective concerns and identities (Clarke et al., 2016). While there is no universal grammar for decoding these styles (Jefferson, 2006), their expressive choices can be read within the socio-cultural and institutional context in which they are situated.

As discussed, their stylistic expressions diverged from conventional or institutionally defined notions of youth style. Although these visual markers may carry negative connotations within mainstream or school-based cultural codes, they are redefined within their peer group as signifiers of being "cool". This re-signification process reflects both their participation in broader youth cultural practices and their local efforts to construct an alternative stylistic and moral identity - one that simultaneously distinguishes them from others and fosters group identity and commitment.

6.2.2 Disengagement and "doing nothing" culture

> During the morning class, I did not engage in direct instruction but instead asked the students to complete their exercise books, as many had not finished their assignments. I observed their behaviours throughout the class. A few students, such as Lin Na, were sleeping; some were looking at themselves in small pocket mirrors; and others, like Xiao Ying, were chatting with their peers. I also saw some students passing notes. (Fieldnote, Monday, 29 May 2023)

This fieldnote captures the range of disengaged behaviours of students observed during self-directed study time. Lin Na and Xiao Ying, mentioned in the vignette, are two participants in the study. Their practices exemplify a broader pattern among some students, who often engaged in "drawing", "dazing", "napping", "chatting in low voices" and "passing notes" as they navigated their class experiences. In interviews, many students stated that they found most classes boring and struggled to follow the content and instructions. This issue was particularly prominent in subjects like mathematics and English, where some of them reported an almost complete incapability to comprehend the learning materials. Relatedly, they often failed to accomplish their homework or had to copy others' merely to fulfil teachers' requirements. The following interview excerpts illustrate students' experience of boredom during class time.

> Zhaocai: The class is so boring.
> Yuanya: How do you deal with the boredom?

Zhaocai: Just thinking about weekend plans or other things to kill the time during class.

Yuanya: Why do you not like classes?

Dai Peng: So boring.

Yuanya: Why is that?

Dai Peng: Just have nothing to do in class.

Yuanya: How do you deal with it?

Dai Peng: Just look at the mirror, have a chat with my deskmate; take a nap; write down what's on the chalkboard; have another chat and then the class is over.

Yuanya: Why do you often feel sleepy in class?

Zhang Zhan: Listening to the teacher just makes me sleepy. I'm not able to comprehend anything. What else is there to do but take a nap?

Beyond academic disengagement, some students expressed a deep sense of alienation from the school environment. Zhang Zhan reflected on his own detachment, stating, *"the campus is big, but there is no space for me. I have achieved nothing here. I don't belong here"*. His experience indicates how disengagement was not merely about a lack of interest in classroom activities but was also deeply intertwined with broader feelings of exclusion and disconnection from the school community, as discussed in chapter 5.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, researchers have often categorised school disengagement into three dimensions - behavioural, emotional (affective) and cognitive (Fredricks et al., 2019; Zhang & Kong, 2020). Arguably, students in the study have demonstrated all three forms of disengagement. They frequently participated in activities unrelated to their studies during class, showed little motivation for academic work, and often expressed feelings of "not belonging". These students can also be categorised as "hidden dropouts" - physically present in school yet mentally disengaged (Makarova & Herzog, 2013). Several participants had, in fact, temporarily dropped out of the school for a while (not attending school).

According to students' accounts, their class disengagement was closely tied to what can be described as a culture of boredom or "doing nothing". During class time, they were only allowed to remain seated and strictly follow the teachers' instructions. To cope, students developed creative ways to entertain themselves, subtly resisting the rigid structure of the classroom while avoiding direct confrontation with authority, such as crafting objects from

classroom materials - fashioning swords from wooden strips of their desks or making playing cards from notebook paper. Through these practices, they cultivated an alternative conception of time, contrasting with the school's dominant time structure, which emphasises academic productivity and future-oriented achievement. In exploring the meaning of boredom, Breidenstein (2007) found that a certain amount of boredom may be inevitable given the sheer workload and rigid schedule at school so he suggested that dealing with boredom to some extent can be understood as a strategic approach to a long-term engagement in class. This seems not true for students in the study. For them, time was not something to be "used productively" in the institutional sense but rather something to be claimed for themselves - a space for freedom, social bonding, and resistance against the imposed academic expectations. This notion of time aligns with observations on working-class boys in the UK who also developed counter-school culture (Corrigan, 1979; Willis, 1977). However, their agency was particularly constrained during class time, as institutional restrictions limited their choices and behaviour. Their feelings of boredom can also be understood as a reflection of their powerless control over time use (Christensen & James, 2001).

The findings also suggest that students' relationships with teachers could further reinforce their detachment from academic studies. Wang Xu, for example, stated that one of his subject teachers ignored him in class, so he in turn ignored the teacher, choosing instead to draw, talk, or stare blankly. Similarly, Xiao Ying expressed that she paid attention in (subject) class because the (subject) teacher would ask her questions, which made her feel a sense of presence. However, in (another subject) class, where she was often overlooked, she chose to do other things like drawing or sleeping. Another student, Luo Cheng also linked his disengagement to his negative relationship with teachers. These reflections highlight that teacher-student interactions can play a crucial role in shaping students' attitudes toward their studies. It suggests that students could be more likely to engage academically when they experience care and fair treatment from teachers (Zhang & Kong, 2020).

As discussed in the previous chapter, students' negative experiences at school can be understood within the framework of recognition and disrespect. Similarly, their feelings of boredom can be seen as another manifestation of a deficit mode of recognition, which, in turn, shapes their attitudes toward learning and classroom behaviours. Their collective experiences and emotional feelings contribute to the emergence of a "doing nothing" culture and the development of an alternative conception of time that diverges from the dominant

institutional discourse. Their resistance to institutional regulations and norms extended beyond classroom disengagement and creative adaptations. It was also evident in their collective practices outside of class, which will be explored in the following section.

6.2.3 Engagement and "doing something" culture

Valentine (2000) identifies two worlds in the school - the formal world characterised by adult-controlled structures and the informal world of students themselves, of their peer interaction, group cultures and social networks. Although for students, school constitutes "a landscape of domination" (Sibley, 1995, p. 76), they still retain agency to carve out their own spaces in everyday lives, particularly in the informal world. As the previous section shows, students faced significant restrictions on their actions during class time. This section explores their cultivation of "doing something" culture in their informal world at school.

Smoking in the toilets during breaktime has emerged as a key activity in participants' school lives, as evidenced in their descriptions of a typical school day:

> I wake up, wash my face, and then go to eat. After eating, I go to the toilet to smoke. After smoking, I go to morning exercises. If I haven't eaten enough after morning exercise, I go down to eat again. After eating, I either do homework in the classroom or mess around. Then I attend morning self-study. After morning self-study, I hang out with friends. When the second class is over, after doing exercises, I go to the toilet to smoke again. After smoking, I just wait around until lunch is served, then go to the toilet and smoke again. After the sixth class in the afternoon, I go smoke again. After dinner, I attend evening self-study. After lunch, I go play basketball. After dinner, I also go to play basketball. After evening self-study, I go eat some night snacks, tease some girls, then return to the dormitory to sleep. (Wang Xu)

Throughout Wang Wu's narrative, the toilet emerges as a recurring space, highlighting its significance beyond its conventional function. His experience was not unique; in fact, many participants frequently referenced the toilet in their accounts, associating it with smoking and, at times, with fighting and bullying. Break times, including the 10-minute intervals between classes and meal breaks, were commonly used for these group activities and the toilet has become a key social space within the school.

Ethical considerations prevented direct observation in the toilets, as explained in Chapter 4. However, students' narratives provided rich descriptions of their activities within this space. One participant Wang Xu described the scene:

> They are always in the toilet in big groups. They smoke in big groups…Four or five people share one cigarette, each taking about four or five puffs, and then the cigarette is gone…sometimes because we smoke and play basketball together, when I've got into some trouble, they stand up for me. At that moment, I feel that it's all worth it.

Wang Xu's account highlights that smoking is more of a social activity than an individual act. Students normally gathered together in the toilets and also shared cigarettes among themselves. While some attributed their frequent smoking to nicotine addiction, others emphasised the social significance of such group activity, as shown in the following conversations:

> Yuanya: You just mentioned that you do not really like smoking, so why did you join them?
> Chen Rui: It's just that I feel like I can get to know a lot of people.
> Yuanya: Because there's a group of people who smoke, so when you join them, you can make friends with them?
> Chen Rui: Yeah.
> Yuanya: Have you made friends?
> Chen Rui: Yes.
>
> Yuanya: Do you feel a sense of meaningful presence at school?
> Dai Peng: Yes. In the toilet, during breaks. All the ninth graders [senior than him] know me.
> Yuanya: How did you get to know them?
> Dai Peng: I smoke in the toilet every day. They share cigarettes with me, and I share cigarettes with them, so we got to know each other.

For students like Chen Rui and Dai Peng, smoking functioned more than a leisure activity or an addiction - it served as a mechanism for social bonding and networking. Chen Rui, for instance, joined the smoking group primarily to find his people. The act of sharing and

smoking cigarettes together in the toilets facilitated friendships and fostered "a sense of presence".

The prevalence of smoking among students in this study can also be understood within the broader socio-cultural context of Yunnan, a major tobacco-producing region in China. Research shows that smoking rates are significantly high in rural Yunnan, with many local residents starting during their teenage years (Cai et al., 2012) although retailers are banned from selling tobacco to minors under 18 by Chinese law. While smoking is normalised in the local context, teenage smoking still carries negative connotations (van der Rijt et al., 2002). Globally, smoking has often been associated with rebellious youth cultures (Cullen, 2010; Lloyd et al., 1997; Scheffels, 2009). For instance, a study in Norway conducted by Scheffels (2009) found that young girls used smoking to challenge the normative "good girl" image. Similarly, research on young people in China has linked male smoking with gang groups and perceptions of deviance (Okamoto et al., 2012). The institutional and local context in the study also demonstrates a negative perception of and disapproval toward teenage smoking. In the school setting, smoking is explicitly prohibited for students, yet it was common to see teachers smoking on campus. While a few "good students" also smoked, they chose to follow the school rules and not to smoke on campus. In contrast, participants in the study attempted to challenge school norms and regulations, redefining smoking as a collective practice through which they built social connections and a sense of belonging.

Beyond smoking, some participants were also engaged in violent activities. One participant, Luo Cheng, shared his experience of a fight at school in which he was involved.

> Yuanya: Have you ever violated school rules?
>
> Luo Cheng: Yes. When I first started in Grade 7, a Grade 8 student wanted to fight me, so I invited all the Grade 9 students. Full of people stuffed in two toilets. We then went to fight him.
>
> Yuanya: A group of you fighting one person?
>
> Luo Cheng: He invited over ten people, and I think I invited over a hundred. The former Grade 9 students all knew me. The toilets were so crowded that you couldn't even get in.
>
> Yuanya: Were you caught by the teachers?
>
> Luo Cheng: No. We had ten lookout posts. One was near the teaching building, another was in front of our dorms, and one was downstairs.

Yuanya: What time was this?

Luo Cheng: After evening study sessions.

Yuanya: And the teachers didn't notice?

Luo Cheng: No.

Luo Cheng provided a detailed account on their organisation of a fight and the number of people involved. The use of lookout posts and coordinated efforts further highlight the collective nature of these informal activities.

Similar to smoking, students' displays of toughness and violence were negatively perceived by school authorities as disruptive and troublemaking (Wang, 2019). While physical violence is often associated with masculinity (Morris, 2008), female students in the study were also observed engaging in similar activities. Rather than asserting themselves through academic success, these students seemed to use physical strength and toughness as an alternative means of establishing their place at school - an ideology linked to the criminal underground (Li et al., 2020), much like the symbolism of tattoos. Although resorting to violence is often viewed as a lack of self-control and carries negative connotations in Confucius culture (Hinsch, 2013), for these students, fighting appeared to provide a sense of control, freedom and physical empowerment as permanent possibilities to defeat boredom and prove their presence. As discussed later in section 6.3.2, physical strength and fighting abilities have become important factors for determining their social status within the group.

Another common practice among these students is engagement in romantic relationships. While dating was not exclusive to this group, they appeared more interested and actively involved in relationships than their peers. In China, romantic relationships among young children or teenagers or "puppy love" are often discouraged by teachers and parents, as they are seen as distractions from academic studies and potential causes of declining performance (Chen et al., 2024). This perspective is unsurprising given the intense academic competition in China's education system, where anything diverting students' focus from their studies is deemed inappropriate or even transgressive. Consequently, romantic relationships are commonly regarded by adults as a typical *luan* behaviour, which is evidenced by students' narratives. Nevertheless, students have emphasised the importance of having a boyfriend or girlfriend at school as Dai Peng said,

I didn't like school, except when I had a date. Then I could see her at school and think of her during class.

Similarly, Kaixin was particularly proactive in pursuing relationships, sharing that she would visit different classes and ask out any boy she found attractive. Explaining her motivation, she stated:

It's not just about being alone - it's more about having nothing to do. The feeling of boredom makes me want to do that.

Another girl, Li Susu, also shared detailed accounts of her romantic experiences, describing how she felt cared for in her interactions with her boyfriend, who was in the same class as her. These accounts suggest that much like smoking and fighting, dating can serve as a way to counter boredom and seek emotional support. While group activities such as smoking and fighting helped students build friendships and find a sense of belonging within a community, dating provided a more personal avenue for connection, allowing them to experience love, care, and intimacy on a one-to-one level. By embracing romantic relationships as part of their daily school life, participants in the study have actively resisted the institutional norms that seek to regulate their time, emotions, and social interactions. The next chapter will discuss how they frequently showcased their personal relationships and expressions of intimacy on social media.

Overall, the findings reported in this section suggest that "doing something" culture can be seen as a response to the perceived monotony of "doing nothing" in the formal learning environment - a way of combating their sense of meaningless existence. Exemplified by their collective group activities and one-to-one romantic relationships, students exercised autonomy, challenged institutional constraints, and redefined peer relationships by engaging in behaviours that, while considered transgressive by the school, were meaningful to them. That being said, "doing nothing" is fundamentally another form of "doing something". It is labelled as "nothing" because it does not align with what is considered "useful" or "productive" within the dominant school culture. Yet, for these students, the concepts of time and productivity have been redefined, and what may appear as "meaningless behaviours" to people outside their group hold great significance for them. Breidenstein (2007) argues that the state of being bored is a state of detachment from one's surroundings. In this study, students' boredom primarily distanced them from the formal learning environment, while

simultaneously strengthening their attachment to their peer group. As mentioned in the previous chapter, these students were often seated together at the back of the classroom thus creating an informal world for their own within the formal setting where they found connection with each other. Outside the formal setting, they also found places such as the toilets for collective activities. In summary, this group of students have established new norms and culture among themselves based on shared values and practices, which provides some conditions for mutual respect and recognition - a theme that will be explored in the next section.

6.3 Establishing a new structure of recognition

6.3.1 The creation of a countercultural identity

As Taylor (1994) asserts, being recognised is a vital human need to achieve full self-realisation. Students need recognition from their peers, teachers, and families - being cared for as special individuals, respected as persons with equal rights and valued for their attributes and achievements (Thomas et al., 2016). The previous chapter shows that students experienced various forms of disregard in their interpersonal relationships with teachers, which has resulted in negative self-image and emotional sufferings. Honneth (1995) suggests a severe consequence of being disrespected, stating that "the experience of being disrespected carries with it the danger of an injury that can bring the identity of the person as a whole to the point of collapse" (p. 131-132). Students' negative moral emotions at school can act not only as an indicator that certain forms of recognition have been withdrawn from them but also as a motivational basis for struggles for recognition. The limited opportunities for formal recognition, discussed earlier in the chapter, further illustrate how students' formal learning experiences were characterised by invisibility and neglect, ultimately hindering their ability to develop a healthy self-relation. In response to this, students have sought to establish new forms of intersubjective practices that can enable them to achieve autonomy and self-worth that they deserve - namely, through the creation of a countercultural identity of *luan*.

As shown in the previous section, I have identified three key aspects that define the oppositional identity or label of *luan*: their physical appearance and style, the "doing nothing" culture in class, and the "doing something" culture outside class. In constructing *luan* culture, these students have appropriated, subverted, and redefined the existing discourses, assigning new meanings to material objects such as tattoos and cigarettes. In contrast to the academic culture embraced by students who conform to school values and expectations, the *luan*

identity can be understood as a counterculture characterised by value systems that are negatively oriented toward the school. As shown earlier, all the objects and actions they adopted are normally perceived as rule-breaking, deviant, and inappropriate by teachers and school authorities. Drawing on the concept of homology from subcultural theory, all elements of their expression - from their bodily modifications to their acts of smoking - convey a cohesive message about their core values and concerns (Hebdige, 1979). Their ways of being at school are consciously constructed with intentional communicational goals, designed to attract attention and contrast with the "normal styles" that follow the socially prescribed roles and options. Rather than an entire creative production, they reappropriated the existing codes by assigning new meanings to the objects or relocating the object in a different context. Their creation of counter-culture values, including expressivity and short-term hedonism as opposed to the formal institutional values including conformity and productivity (Young, 1997) can be viewed as an escape from a world dominated by the institutional structure of recognition and a step into a new form of possibility where self-worth is defined on their own terms.

Here *luan* does not only act as a label which serves to marginalise these students but an interpretative basis and survival strategy. As Honneth (1995) argues, to make social resistance happen, the individual experience of being disrespected has to be read as typical for an entire group and there has to be a shared semantic or intersubjective framework of interpretation in bridging personal feelings of injury and the development of group identities for collective resistance. In this sense, individuals need to be aware that they are not alone in their struggles and that others share similar experiences of disrespect, allowing them to collectively challenge the injustice they face. In the current study, the common problem this group of students faced is their marginalised positioning and systemic disrespect received at school. This institutional label and its attached negative connotations thus provided an interpretative framework through which they developed a shared understanding of the specific set of circumstances they were situated in. As Honneth (1995) explains, group members "generate a subcultural horizon of interpretation within which experiences of disrespect that, previously, had been fragmented and coped with privately can then become the moral motives for a collective 'struggle for recognition'" (p. 164). With this shared awareness of their social positioning, their formation of a countercultural identity can be seen as an attempt to create alternative sources of affirmation through peer relationships.

Struggles for new forms of recognition can be a process of exploring new forms of identity which are not previously recognised in the existing system. While these students were aware that teachers associated *luan* with undesirable behaviour, they nonetheless embraced it as a cultural marker through which they construct their own identity and sense of belonging. In direct and frequent interaction with other group members, individuals are able to receive affirmation of their characteristics. "In the need to directly experience the esteem of one's peers lies *one*, if not the, central motive behind group formation today" (Honneth, 2012, p. 207). Under shared social conditions, these students sought to establish group-specific codes of values and expectations and foster solidarity within their groups. By following the subcultural norms that replaced the dominant discourse, individuals are able to give esteem to each other based on this new recognition order.

As discussed in the previous chapter, students developed negative perceptions of themselves in relation to their teachers and "good students". In contrast, within their peer groups, they appeared to cultivate a more positive self-image through mutual validation and shared lived experiences. As illustrated in section 5.3.2, both Chen Rui and Zhang Mili were recognised by their friends as possessing positive qualities. This suggests the implications of the new recognition order on their development of self-identity. Through this peer-based recognition, they were more likely to foster healthy self-relations. It may also help explain why these students tended to associate primarily with one another and had limited interaction with other groups, particularly with "good students", who were more closely aligned with the dominant recognition norms of the school.

In summary, given the limited opportunities available for these students to gain formal recognition from teachers, peer relationships have played a crucial role in providing care, support, and validation, allowing them to affirm their identities as unique and valuable individuals. As demonstrated earlier, they constructed a collective stylistic image, embraced a "doing nothing" culture in class, and engaged in a "doing something" culture outside class - practices through which they cultivated a sense of presence that was often absent in their formal schooling experiences. I therefore theorise their construction of a collective countercultural identity, labelled as *luan*, as a means of establishing a new structure of peer-based recognition - one in which they provided each other with validation and affirmation through peer interactions. While this new recognition structure created more opportunities for students to seek validation, allowing their identities to be defined beyond academic

performance, it does not necessarily mean that all members within the group achieved the same level of recognition - a complexity that will be explored in the following section.

6.3.2 Creating exclusion and hierarchy

In developing new norms and culture within the group, students simultaneously created new conditions for mutual recognition, which could result in both belonging and exclusion. To be accepted as a full member of the peer group, individuals were expected to display certain behaviours or characteristics that signified their legitimacy. For instance, as mentioned earlier, Chen Rui joined the smoking group despite not enjoying smoking itself. Similarly, Miao Han, though not a smoker herself, still accompanied her friend to the toilet, where a group of girls smoked together. She explained that doing so helped her expand her social circle and connected with older students whom she otherwise would not have interacted with. These examples demonstrate their efforts to conform and gain acceptance.

However, not all students were included in this peer group. Li Yuan, for example, did not participate in the collective practices of the *luan* subgroup and spoke of his loneliness and isolation during an interview:

> Yuanya: Overall, what do you think of school? Do you like being there?
> Li Yuan: No, I don't like it.
> Yuanya: Why is that?
> Li Yuan: It's just that I'm always alone at school. I'm here by myself.
> Yuanya: Does being alone make school unpleasant for you?
> Li Yuan: Yes.
> Yuanya: How does that make you feel?
> Li Yuan: Usually, I just stay in the classroom and don't go out for anything else.
> Yuanya: So you tend to keep to yourself and don't interact much with other students?
> Li Yuan: Yes.

Li Yuan also mentioned that his only friend at school was a Grade 8 student (a grade lower than him) he knew through family connections. His lack of engagement with the *luan* group's shared practices led to his exclusion.

Similarly, Liu Shi distanced himself from the *luan* group. In interviews, he emphasised that he had a "soft personality" and that he usually avoided violent activities. While he took pride

in his good temper and tolerance, he also mentioned feeling lonely and disconnected at school:

> I always feel upset at school because they don't hang out with me. I have very few friends.

To avoid this isolation, Liu Shi often took longer periods of absence than necessary to escape from school. His refusal to take part in group activities, especially those involving violence and aggression, separated him from the *luan* culture. As with Li Yuan, Liu Shi experienced exclusion not only from the school's formal structures but also from peer recognition, finding himself caught between institutional expectations and peer group norms. These examples show that, just as the school environment excluded certain students for failing to meet academic standards, the alternative peer culture also established its own evaluative framework - one in which those who failed to conform to found themselves excluded.

Beyond exclusion, the peer group also developed its own internal status system. In contrast to the school's academic hierarchy, this group valued traits such as toughness, social connections and resistance to authority. When asked who was the most popular, one participant, Xiaoshuai responded:

> In our eyes, the person who is the toughest in a fight is the most popular. Whenever there's a fight, people ask them for help, and once they show up, no one dares to make a move. That's the kind of person who gets the most respect.

Similarly, Wang Xu explained how status within the group was determined by physical strength:

> Wang Xu: My social status at school isn't very high. Among our group - Luo Cheng, Xiaoshuai, Student C, and me - Luo Cheng and Xiaoshuai are ranked higher than us.
> Yuanya: Why is that?
> Wang Xu: They order us around, like asking us to buy them water from the store. And then I pass the tasks down to Student C.
> Yuanya: Why do they get to boss you around?
> Wang Xu: Because they don't hesitate to use force. We're afraid of them. We can't beat them, so we have no choice but to listen to them.

This informal hierarchy applied to girls as well. Miao Han described Kaixin as the "boss" at the top of the hierarchy, with no one daring to challenge her. According to Miao Han, Kaixin inherited this status from her cousin, a former student who had been the previous "boss". Kaixin maintained her dominant status through her ability to mobilise a large group of peers for acts of violence or bullying.

Apart from physical strength, extreme *luan* behaviours also served as a marker of social status. Xiaoshuai, for example, recalled an incident he proudly referred to as a "heroic act":

> I once climbed over the school wall to go to another school to visit my girlfriend, and I even ended up at the police station afterward. After my schoolmates heard about this, no one dared to mess with me anymore.

This anecdote reflects how acts of defiance and extreme transgression against school rules elevated one's status within the group. Rather than being a source of shame or disciplinary concern, such behaviour was reframed as a demonstration of boldness and prestige within their peer groups.

These findings suggest that the group's internal hierarchy was based on criteria such as fighting ability, social influence, and the levels of defiance against school authority. Those who engaged in the most transgressive behaviours, such as Xiaoshuai, often occupied the highest positions within their peer group, even as they were positioned at the bottom of the school's official hierarchy. This contrast highlights a fundamental reversal of values: what constituted failure within the school's framework has become a source of status and leadership in the alternative peer culture.

As discussed earlier, just as the school system categorised students based on academic achievements and unevenly distributed recognition, the peer group's alternative structure of recognition also produced forms of inequality and exclusion. While this structure created new avenues for identity affirmation and validation, access to recognition was still conditional, as determined by the level of conformity to the group's own evaluative standards.

In summary, students in the study engaged in *luan* practices as a mode of self-expression and resistance, constructing an alternative value system through which they could claim identity and recognition. However, this system also produced forms of exclusion and internal hierarchy. Still, most participants remained actively committed to their peer community,

finding belonging and validation through collective participation. The following section explores how students negotiated institutional authority and carved out informal spaces within which their mutual recognition could unfold.

6.4 Negotiating institutional power

The school functions as a regulatory authority over students, shaping not only their behaviour within school spaces but also their broader life trajectories. While the students in this study developed an alternative, non-academic way of being at school, most still acknowledged the value of education for their future career prospects. Many of them expressed a pragmatic understanding of schooling, often stating, "I know achieving academic success is very important, as it is the best 'way out'". Their belief in the instrumental value of education was deeply ingrained, aligning with broader social narratives that emphasise academic achievement as a pathway to upward mobility and as the most effective way out of rural agricultural life and labour-intensive jobs (Hong, 2021; Wu, 2016). As a result, they largely accepted the legitimacy of the school's evaluative framework despite their disengagement from formal learning.

The power of the school extends beyond academic evaluation; it also governs the issuance of diplomas, which are crucial for students' future trajectories, whether for further education or employment. Notably, diplomas were generally awarded to all students regardless of academic attainment, except in cases of severe disciplinary violations. Such institutional authority shaped students' behaviours and attitudes, as illustrated by Li Yun's account: after being bullied, he chose not to retaliate, explaining, "I need to behave so I can still get the graduation diploma". This sentiment reflects a widespread concern among students - the need to secure a diploma regardless of their academic performance or the various forms of punishment they were subjected to.

Although several students questioned the causal link between academic success and future economic mobility, their critiques remained focused on personal circumstances rather than structural factors. Teachers' acts of punishment, no matter in which form, were often interpreted by students as manifestations of good intentions aimed at helping them succeed academically. Some also attributed their academic struggles to personal reasons (Hansen, 2015), accepting the consequences including experiences of disrespect discussed in Chapter 5 as their own responsibility.

Honneth (1995) argues that *"whether the cognitive potential inherent in feeling hurt or ashamed becomes a moral-political conviction depends above all on how the affected subject's cultural-political environment is constructed"* (pp. 138-139). Embedded in a social environment where "powerful discourses, continuously reinforced by teachers and parents, construct schooling as 'the best path' towards a bright future, as a family responsibility, and as a gateway to freedom" (Xiang, 2018, p. 99), these students lacked the critical perspective on the existing social structure necessary for transformative change (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). As a result, rather than seeking to fundamentally challenge the system, they turned to peer relationships as an alternative source of recognition, a space where they could find certain levels of affirmation and self-realisation.

It is important to point out that students' subjection to school authority did not imply full acceptance of their marginalisation or invisibility within the school environment. Their emotional suffering still served as a motivating force in their struggle for recognition. As discussed, they actively created new forms of recognition that extended beyond the boundaries of what the school allowed or acknowledged. However, as Cohen (1955) notes, subcultural production carries inherent constraints and costs. For these students, embracing *luan* as an oppositional cultural identity often led to heightened disrespect from teachers and school authorities. This raises a key question: how do students reconcile the paradox of finding self-worth through a countercultural identity while simultaneously risking further exclusion from the mainstream school structure? To navigate these power dynamics and negotiate their need for recognition, students developed two key strategies: strategic conformity and silent conformity. The next section explores these approaches in detail.

6.4.1 Strategic conformity

A group of participants developed their own ways of responding to the regulatory power of the institution, which I term as strategic conformity. Within the structured school environment, students' activities and behaviours were predominantly governed by a rigid timetable that regulated their movements from the moment they woke up until bedtime, as detailed in Chapter 4. Class attendance occupied most of their time, interspersed with brief breaks and mealtimes. This organisational framework illustrates how school regulations are deeply embedded in spatial arrangements, shaping and constraining students' movements (Catling, 2005; Hopkins, 2010). Students' accounts and on-site observations have shown that their navigation and reappropriation of school spaces emerged as a key strategy for avoiding

contingent punishment and disrespect from teachers. Among these spaces, the school toilets acted as a key site for articulating and affirming their identities.

As mentioned earlier, students often went to the school toilets in groups during breaks. Originally designed for physiological needs, these spaces were redefined as gathering spots where students engaged in collective *luan* behaviours marked by smoking and fighting. Unlike the spatial marginalisation they experienced in classrooms, students exerted a sense of ownership over the toilets, which were subject to minimal direct control from school authority. As such, students perceived these spaces as "theirs", transforming them into places for socialisation, identity formation, and mutual validation. Within the toilet space, students engaged in shared practices ("doing"), experienced a sense of inclusion and support ("feeling"), and reinforced their membership in their subcultural group ("being") (Titman, 1994). Moreover, it also functioned as a contested space - not only a site of friendship and belonging but also a site of exclusion and separation as non-group members were excluded from participation thus reinforcing the divide between them and other students.

The tension between adult control and student agency is central to studies of youth and space. Teachers exerted authority over toilet use, restricting access during class hours to maintain order, which meant students had to maximise their use of break times. It was common to see small groups rushing to the toilets as soon as the bell rang. To avoid detection, they often assigned a watchperson to alert them if a teacher was approaching. Besides toilets, students also appropriated other areas, such as the canteen, parking lot, and empty classrooms during non-teaching periods, for various activities irrelevant to academic work. One participant, for example, described meeting his girlfriend in the classroom after evening classes when most students had returned to the dormitory. However, much like toilet use, these activities carried the risk of detection, as teachers patrolled the campus to monitor student behaviour. Their navigation of school spaces reflected a strategic negotiation of institutional power - adapting to adult-imposed restrictions while seeking pockets of autonomy.

The findings highlight spatial disciplining as a key mechanism of student control. While schools are primarily designed as learning environments, students frequently resisted and redefined these spaces, asserting their own claims within institutional constraints (Schmidt, 2013). In negotiating dominant power structures, participants in the study developed a nuanced understanding of socio-spatial dynamics, identifying where and how to position themselves within the school. They recognised spaces that were difficult to repurpose, such

as classrooms and teachers' offices, as well as those more conducive to congregation and informal interactions, such as the toilets. By disrupting the structured spatial order in certain ways, students attempted to define themselves beyond their regulated identities (Cloke & Jones, 2005).

In cultivating *luan* culture, students have created what Scott (1990) terms "offstage social spaces" (p. 118) for their own purposes. Nevertheless, these acts of transgression were often deemed "too small to interrupt the reproduction of socio-spatial relations in the interest of the hegemonic power" (Sibley, 1995, p. 76), which highlights the limits of student agency within the adult-dominated environment (Barker et al., 2010; Pike, 2008). The relatively low stakes of students' spatial disruptions likely explain why the school authority somewhat tolerated their forms of resistance and reappropriations. This tolerance also extended to students' stylistic self-expression and their relatively non-disruptive ways of passing time in class. The teachers' responses seemed to indicate a tacit agreement between teachers and students about the normality of such *luan* activities, which had become routine for these students. Rather than completely suppressing these behaviours, the school appeared to accept students' "strategic conformity" as a way to maintain overall order and prevent more radical acts of resistance.

6.4.2 Silent conformity

As mentioned earlier, several participants were excluded from the *luan* subgroup due to their lack of engagement in group activities. In this section, I will explore the concept of silent conformity through the example of Li Yun.

Li Yun was one of the few participants who self-identified as a "bad student" but not a *luan* student. Unlike most of the others in the study, Li Yun rarely violated school regulations or engaged in typical *luan* behaviours as described in section 6.3.2. A teacher commented on him as "quiet, honest, and obedient", implying his passive compliance with school norms. Li Yun was the only student among all participants from Grade Nine - the final year of their compulsory education who faced the imminent *Zhongkao* (high school entrance examinations). As someone whose academic results ranked at the bottom in his class, Li Yun showed little interest in schoolwork and the teachers appeared to take a passive approach to his struggles, often allowing him to sleep during class.

In an interview, Li Yun explained his approach to school rules, stating:

Academic attainment is one thing and breaking the school rules is another. I don't break school rules because it's bad to do that. Although I'm bad at studies, I don't do things against the rules.

Li Yun's conformity to school rules, despite his academic struggles, distinguished him from most participants. His understanding of what it meant to "break school rules" aligned with the *luan* behaviours enacted by some of his peers. Many students observed that adults, including teachers and parents, often lowered their expectations for academic success while continuing to prioritise behavioural conformity. Li Yun captured this idea succinctly in the interview: "Academic attainment is one thing, and breaking school rules is another". This statement reflects the school's implicit stance and can be understood within the broader context of a highly competitive education system that functions as a sorting mechanism (Brown et al., 1997). Since not all students are able to succeed academically or transition to academic high schools, teachers adjusted their expectations accordingly, prioritising discipline and order over academic achievement to maintain control within the school environment.

Although all students were expected to be "well-behaved" and obedient, few participants consistently met this expectation to the extent that Li Yun did. He exemplified a model of passive compliance. By avoiding *luan* behaviours and adhering to school rules - apart from occasionally sleeping in class, which his teachers tolerated as non-disruptive - he fulfilled the school's minimum expectations. Li Yun's case illustrates how silent conformity can function as a survival strategy for students who, despite poor academic performance, attempt to avoid the punitive attention often directed at more visibly disruptive peers.

The implications of this silent conformity are twofold. First, while his obedience reduced the likelihood of disciplinary action or overt disrespect from teachers, his low academic performance continued to marginalise him. He remained in a tolerated yet largely overlooked position as he received minimal attention or support from teachers in class. Second, his detachment from *luan* activities and the peer culture further isolated him from classmates. Without engaging in collective practices that strengthened social bonds, he struggled to achieve peer-based recognition, even among those who shared similar status. This deepened his sense of invisibility, loneliness and disconnection from school life.

This social isolation may also help explain his strong interest in romantic relationships and his frequent expressions of affection on *Kuaishou*, which will be explored in the next chapter.

His persistent efforts to interact with me during fieldwork - whether during school breaks, through messages, or via weekend phone calls - also reflected a desire to be seen and acknowledged. Perhaps, for Li Yun, I represented someone outside the evaluative gaze of teachers; someone who would not judge him by academic or behavioural standards, but who could offer respect and understanding. As Graham et al. (2016) argue, research can itself serve as an act of recognition. By studying this group of students who struggle to affirm their identities within an institution that fails to recognise their value, I was hoping to give voice to their experiences and affirm their significance.

In summary, students employed different strategies to negotiate institutional power. I have referred to these as "strategic conformity", which primarily involved navigating spatial aspects of school life, and "silent conformity", wherein students passively adhere to school expectations. As schools often constitute "a landscape of domination" (Sibley, 1995, p. 76), both forms of conformity essentially reflect students' subjection to the institutional order. Their schooling experiences were fundamentally shaped by asymmetrical power relations, in which teachers exercised disciplinary authority, and students sought ways to negotiate their positioning within the system.

A central mechanism of control exercised by teachers involved the strategic use of recognition - both its granting and withdrawal - as a tool of enforcing discipline and reinforcing institutional norms (Laws & Davies, 2000). As students became increasingly aware of the risks associated with visible transgression, they often regulated their behaviour - at least in the presence of teachers - in a calculated effort to avoid punishment and public humiliation. The possibility of teachers withholding recognition, combined with the threat of disrespect, often proved effective in maintaining order. In this context, students' desire for recognition can serve as a powerful motivation to conform to school norms in pursuit of approval. At the same time, however, this desire constrained their capacity to question or resist the existing structure, thereby contributing to the reproduction of the existing social relations within the school.

While some students sought to claim agency by carving out spaces for themselves, these efforts remain limited, and this was only possible because it did not fundamentally disrupt the dominant structure. Ultimately, their actions illustrate that conformity and resistance do not exist as binary oppositions but rather as interwoven strategies of survival and self-definition within authoritative educational structures. Their engagement in strategic and silent

conformity highlights the complex interplay between institutional power, student agency, and the broader sociocultural expectations surrounding education. While their struggles for recognition suggest an implicit critique of the dominant evaluative framework of schooling, their responses remain largely situated within the existing structures of power. Eventually, their actions do not represent absolute acceptance nor radical opposition, but an ongoing process of self-positioning within an environment that simultaneously disciplines and defines them.

6.5 Chapter summary

This chapter explored how students developed an alternative *luan* identity and peer culture at school as a way of establishing recognition among peers. I examined three key features of this cultural identity: (1) a distinctive style of appearance; (2) a "doing nothing" culture in the classroom; and (3) a "doing something" culture outside the classroom. The formation of this countercultural identity can be understood as an attempt to create alternative sources of affirmation and belonging through peer relationships. I also argue that such forms of peer-based recognition also created internal hierarchies and exclusion, as the group established its own criteria for membership and legitimacy.

I also discussed how students negotiated institutional power through different forms of conformity: strategic conformity, which primarily involved navigating spatial aspects of school life; and silent conformity, where students passively adhere to school expectations. In doing so, students were engaged in an ongoing process in seeking certain forms of recognition and to avoid experiences of disrespect. Whether this form of recognition provides sufficient conditions for developing healthy self-relations will be discussed in Chapter 8. The following chapter shifts focus to the online space, where students' struggles for recognition extended beyond the physical boundaries of the school into the digital space.

Chapter 7 Constructing post-*jingshen* culture on *Kuaishou*

Chapter overview

The previous chapter examined how students constructed *luan* culture at school as a way to establish peer-based recognition within the constraints of a rigid educational system. This chapter shifts focus to their digital practices on *Kuaishou*, where participants arguably had greater autonomy to express themselves and articulate alternative identities. Drawing on their online posts, interactions, and personal narratives, this chapter explores how social media reconfigures their ongoing struggle for recognition.

The chapter begins by analysing the creation of post-*jingshen* culture on *Kuaishou*, marked by distinctive forms of stylistic self-presentation. Participants ascribed new meanings to these practices and built peer networks grounded in shared aesthetics and understandings. The discussion then turns to the expression of emotional intimacy and support within this online community, including how these affective connections were validated and quantified on the platform. The next section examines how participants navigated adult surveillance, institutional norms, and platform censorship, and how they developed creative strategies to reclaim agency within these constraints. Building on these themes, the chapter finally discusses three key mechanisms of mediated recognition on social media. First, it considers how participants established a recognisable mode of self-presentation through imitated and networked publics. Second, it examines the formation of an affirmative and emotionally supportive community through intimated publics. Third, it analyses datafied recognition, where measurable popularity became a key marker of social value and self-worth.

7.1 From *jingshen* to post-*jingshen*: transforming style and meaning

> As we walked outside the school, Zeng Kai asked if he could retrieve his phone, which he had stored in a nearby shop. I agreed, and after collecting his phone, he took several photos of himself. As we continued downhill, he borrowed my phone to take additional photos. Before the interview, Zeng Kai was deeply engaged in editing videos that had been recorded earlier on the playground in his village. He experimented with different background music to enhance the synchronisation of his movements with the rhythm of the music, a type of video referred to as *kadian* - a style in which visual transitions and actions precisely align with changes in the music

beat. When he was editing, he asked for my opinion on which musical track best complemented the video. Throughout this process, he continued refining his edits, testing different musical overlays, and fine-tuning the timing. After finalising his selection, he uploaded the video to his secondary *Kuaishou* account and said that he planned to post another version on his primary account after school. I was struck by the level of dedication and patience he had shown in creating one single post. (Fieldnote, Tuesday, 13 June 2023)

This vignette highlights Zeng Kai's investment in digital content creation on *Kuaishou*. During a follow-up interview, I inquired about the level of effort required for video production and editing. He responded that, while it was indeed a time-consuming process, he did not perceive it as burdensome because he genuinely enjoyed it. Zeng Kai was not alone in this commitment to content creation. Another participant, Kaixin, similarly described the great effort involved in curating her posts. She reported spending several hours on a single upload, meticulously selecting and editing photos, crafting textual captions, choosing an appropriate soundtrack, and ensuring all elements were seamlessly integrated. While some of them spent hours on one single post, others said it would not take long in creating their content although they seemed to follow similar routines from picking images, captions to music. Yet, regardless of the time they spent in content creation, they seemed to develop a collective cultural identity on *Kuaishou*, which I term as post-*jingshen* culture. This section is divided into three parts. The first examines the stylistic presentation of post-*jingshen* identity; the second explores how participants constructed and negotiated the meaning of being *jingshen*; and the final part discusses the peer networks and sense of belonging cultivated within this peer culture. Throughout the chapter, I presented some examples of participants' *Kuaishou* posts, followed by analysis and discussion. As discussed in section 4.5.3, I used offline editing (via Microsoft PowerPoint) to apply artistic filters on these online images and obscure faces thereby ensuring de-identification.

7.1.1 A distinctive style of self-presentation

The three posts below are from Zhaocai, a typical *luan* student as described in the previous chapter, who had tattoos not only on his fingers but also on his forehead, forearm, neck, and chest - all clearly visible in his online posts.

Figure 2 Online post 1	**Post 1** features an image of his three-faced Buddha tattoo on his chest. The tattoos on his arms appear blurred and he is holding a sword-like object on his hands (faced obscured by me). He is dressed in ripped jeans. The image caption consists of two hashtags: #OrdinaryCitizen and #WaterproofTattooStickers.
Figure 3 Online post 2	**Post 2** shows a close-up of a heavily tattooed arm holding a cigarette between the fingers. The participant uses an editing template that displays his selection of the "Warm Contrast Effect" from various filters shown at the bottom of the image. The caption consists of two hashtags: #SafeNon-toxicTattooStickers; #WaterproofTattooStickers; PleaseDoNotBlock.

Figure 4 Online post 3

Post 3 is taken on a roadside with mountains in the background. The participant is standing with a cigarette in his mouth, and another tucked behind his ear. He wears a loose t-shirt and jeans, exposing tattoos on his arms. He also applied a white brushstroke effect to obscure his face. The text for this image is "@huihuo" [a popular entertainment news account on *Kuaishou* with millions of followers]. Additional edits of the image include special effects such as lightning, fire and English letters.

Another participant, Kaixin, who was regarded by other members as the group leader (as mentioned in the previous chapter), also shared similar styles of posts on her *Kuaishou* accounts. Two examples are shown below.

Figure 5 Online post 4

Post 4 features an in-mirror selfie taken in a bathroom, with the participant holding a mobile phone that almost completely obscures her face. This type of selfie was common among participants, who often shared mirror images taken in bathrooms, bedrooms, or any locations with a mirror. In this image, Kaixin wears a white T-shirt that reveals tattoos on one arm and applies the same visual filter as in Post 2. The caption reads: Today's goal: Win over all the women #KeepItSimple.

Figure 6 Online Post 5

Post 5 depicts the participant wearing a school uniform and standing in front of a red door decorated with traditional Spring Festival couplets. She holds a cigarette in one hand, and her face is obscured using a white paint effect (applied by herself). The caption reads: Whether you love me or deceive me, at least I am truly happy when you're by my side.

Looking at these examples of students' online posts as shown in Posts 1 to 5, a set of recurring stylistic elements emerges such as tattoos, specific clothing and fashion choices, and homogeneous editing techniques. The phrase *jingshen* frequently appears in captions and comments of participants' online posts - a Chinese term often used as a noun meaning spirit or mind and also as an adjective to describe someone full of vitality. Unlike other comments such as "pretty" and "handsome" which have relatively clear and universally understood meanings, *jingshen* seems to carry a more nuanced and complex connotation beyond its literal meaning, according to students' narratives. Some participants found it challenging to articulate what they meant by *jingshen* in their own terms, which reflects the idea that youth subcultures are often fluid and abstract concepts constructed through social interaction (Williams, 2011). As such, responses were often uncertain, with participants offering comments such as "it was difficult to explain it", "just an internet phrase", or "I don't know. I'm not sure". Nevertheless, some of them provided insights suggesting that *jingshen* culture is characterised by a distinctive style. Their descriptions include the following:

Ripped jeans, smoking, fighting, and *jingshen* poses. (Kaixin)

Those non-mainstream individuals, with unconventional hairstyles that are somewhat peculiar and amusing. (Wang Xu)

Featuring DJ music and accompanied by particularly *zhuai* (swagger) quotes. (Miao Han)

Those people who have tattoos, smoke and drink alcohol. (Ma Juan)

The phrases "non-mainstream" and "unconventional" highlight the divergence of *jingshen* style from normative youth cultures. Participants' descriptions of being *jingshen* include both personal attributes such as tattoos and hairstyles and digital artefacts including music and textual expressions. Here "DJ music", as referenced by students, commonly featured club styles and fast-paced beats in contrast to slow, classical music. Similarly, "*zhuai* (swagger) quotes" functions as another marker of *jingshen* identity, reflecting a distinct linguistic style used in online interactions to project confidence and rebelliousness.

Although academic research on the *jingshen* phenomenon remains scarce, online discourse suggests that the term *jingshen xiaohuo* (*jingshen* guy) gained popularity between 2019 and 2020. It originally referred to young men with a distinct look including bowl-cut hairstyles, tight-fitting pants, particular types of shoes, and signature dance moves (Swagness, 2020). The later emergence of *jingshen xiaomei* (*jingshen* girl) incorporated additional feminine attributes such as heavy make-up, black stockings and short skirts.

However, rather than simply replicating the narrow stylistic templates of earlier *jingshen* expressions, participants in this study appeared to engage in adopting, reconstructing and innovating new modes of stylistic forms. In doing so, they have expanded the boundaries of *jingshen* identity and made it more fluid and inclusive. One participant, Wang Xu, reflected on the evolving nature of *jingshen*:

> For those born between 1995 and 2005, *jingshen* was more commonly associated with specific items like tight-fitting trousers. However, starting from our generation, I think *jingshen* is more about dressing with confidence and energy, projecting a more vibrant and expressive presence.

Similarly, Apple's accounts show how *jingshen* is continuously redefined through reinterpretations:

> Apple: Because this photo is very *jingshen*.
> Yuanya: Why do you think this photo is *jingshen*?
> Apple: Because this outfit is trendy, and I'm wearing sunglasses.
> Yuanya: How is this outfit trendy?
> Apple: It's just in fashion.

Yuanya: What kind of photos do you consider *jingshen*?

Apple: Probably black and white filtered photos, with sunglasses, and a crowd of people.

As Wang Xu suggests, *jingshen* is no longer confined to a fixed visual identity but has evolved into a more fluid and interpretive concept. This is echoed in Apple's emphasis on being "trendy". The idea of trend or fashion is inherently dynamic, shaped by ongoing cultural and generational shifts. In this sense, being on trend appears to be the core of *jingshen* identity today: it is not about conforming to a static set of visual markers, but about actively participating in what is current, fashionable and culturally resonant.

This fluidity is not limited to physical appearance but also reflected in participants' use of digital artefacts, which changed over time in response to the evolving trends on *Kuaishou*. Participants were observed to adopt different editing templates, visual styles, and filters at different times, reflecting a strong sensitivity to what was fashionable or popular in the digital space. For instance, the editing templates featured in Post 2 and Post 4, along with the black-and-white filter mentioned by Apple, were once widely used but later replaced by newer trends. Similarly, the use of the white paint effect to obscure faces (see Posts 3 and 5) was also described as part of a digital trend, even though some participants acknowledged its functional use such as covering awkward facial expressions. The earlier popularity of *kadian* (image-beat sync) videos, as discussed at the beginning, likewise illustrates how particular formats can be a temporary trend. Together, these examples highlight the trend-driven and transient nature of *jingshen* expressions on *Kuaishou*, where style was continually shaped by shifting digital aesthetics.

Although a few core elements of *jingshen* identity including tattoos and cigarettes remain rather prominent and consistent in participants' online creations, the overall temporality and flexibility of *jingshen* style allow for great freedom in digital self-expression. This stands in contrast to the earlier, more rigid stylistic norms associated with *jingshen xiaohuo* (*jingshen* guy) or *jingshen xiaomei* (*jingshen* girl). The emergence of new stylistic markers reflects the active role these young people play in shaping their own cultural forms and norms, drawing from both physical (such as clothing and accessories) and digital (such as music, texts, editing styles) materials.

Moreover, students' reappropriation of *jingshen* culture also reflects their responses to broader social conditions. School regulations around students' physical appearance, including restrictions on hair colour, clothing and accessories, to a large extent limited their ability to visually express identity through material means. Their relatively limited access to consumer goods may also shape the way they presented themselves physically. In response, many turned to digital artefacts such as DJ music, textual argots, and editing templates as more accessible tools for self-expression. The constant influx of new editing styles and visual effects on *Kuaishou* means that the aesthetic of *jingshen* style is always in flux, allowing young people to experiment and expand their expressive forms.

Understanding *jingshen* also requires looking beyond its surface aesthetics. As Jefferson (2006) reminds us, there is no universal decoding system for fashion - styles acquire meaning through their specific social and cultural contexts. The key stylistic elements that students associated with *jingshen* such as fashion choices, tattoos and smoking are often stigmatised in Chinese society, particularly within the school system, where they are frequently linked to deviance or "at-risk" youth, as discussed in the previous chapter. Students themselves often described *jingshen* as "non-mainstream" or "unconventional", reflecting a sense of distance from dominant cultural and institutional norms. How students negotiated the meaning of such countercultural identity will be discussed in the next section.

7.1.2 Beyond style: negotiating the meaning of *jingshen*
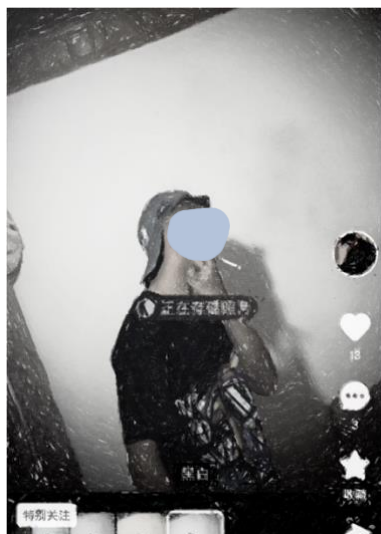

Figure 7 Online post 6

Post 6 shows Xiaoshuai with a cigarette in his mouth, wearing a patterned T-shirt and a baseball cap turned backwards (face obscured by me). He applied the same editing filter as in Posts 2 and 4. The caption reads: Pull me close, never leave me, I will walk through the hardships with you. @girlfriend".

Figure 8 Online post 7

Post 7 features a side-by-side photo collage. The left image is a screenshot of Xiaoshuai's final exam report card, showing a total score of 228 out of 560, with only the Chinese grade passing and all other subjects scoring below the 60% pass mark. The right is the same self-portrait used in Post 6 (face obscured by me).

Yuanya: You mentioned that you are no longer *jingshen*, why do you think so?

Ma Juan: Because I want to study well.

Yuanya: Do you consider your girlfriend *jingshen*?

Chen Rui: No, she wants to study.

Yuanya: If she wants to study, does that mean she is not a *jingshen* girl?

Chen Rui: Yes, a *jingshen* girl is someone who does not want to study.

As shown in the above conversations, *jingshen* often involves disengagement from academic studies - one is considered *jingshen* only if detached from schoolwork. While this identity, which stands as an inversion of the exemplary student at school, is often described as undesirable by adults, students have actively redefined it in the digital space by attributing positive meanings to this self-expression.

Yuanya: I often see people use the phrase *gao zhiliang* on *Kuaishou*. Have you heard of it? What does it mean?

Zuo Lang: it refers to a *shuai* (*handsome*) guy.

Yuanya: How is that different from *jingshen*?

Zuo Lang: They are pretty much the same.

Yuanya: What kind of people do you typically associate with *jingshen*?

Chen Rui: Someone whose online posts have *qizhi*.

Yuanya: What do you mean by *qizhi*?

Chen Rui: Their hair is styled, they dress well, and they are *shuai* (*handsome*). Basically, their online presence is visually appealing.

As participants' responses suggest, students employed additional terms, such as *gao zhiliang* (literally "high quality") and *qizhi* (literally "temperament"), to convey meanings similar to *jingshen*. In everyday discourse, both terms often serve as compliments: *gao zhiliang* connotes excellence and refinement; *quzhi* is often used to describe individuals perceived as attractive, elegant or well-mannered. Besides, *shuai* (handsome/beautiful) and "cool" are also used interchangeably with *jingshen*. By adopting such terms with positive implications, students sought to reinforce the aspirational qualities of their identity - stylistic appeal, confidence and individualistic expression. They also incorporated these phrases into their online expressions, as seen in textual captions. For example, "A handsome guy like no other; his *qizhi* can hold up half the sky", or hashtags such as "*Gao zhiliang* guy" and "Cool guy". These linguistic choices illustrate an attempt to construct a favourable image of *jingshen* in their own terms.

However, despite the positive meaning students have invested in *jingshen* culture as a counter-narrative to the dominant framework, their attitudes towards it remained complex. This complexity demonstrates the tensions they navigated between their collective identity and the dominant cultural values.

Yuanya: Are you familiar with the term *jingshen*?

Dai Peng: Yes, it describes *shehui bailei* (literally "dregs of society"), people who are non-mainstream, with dyed hair, and tight pants, and so on.

Yuanya: So, do you consider *jingshen* a positive or negative comment?

Dai Peng: It's a compliment; it's for those who don't go to school.

Yuanya: If someone comments *jingshen* on your post, how do you interpret it?

Dai Peng: It describes our style, so it's a compliment.

Dai Peng's response illustrates the contradictions in students' interpretations of *jingshen* identity. While he associated *jingshen* with marginalisation as indicated by his reference to "dregs of society", he simultaneously embraced it as a stylistic compliment for his own self-presentation. Dai Peng was not alone in expressing contradictory attitudes towards *jingshen*.

In interviews, many participants showed ambiguities and uncertainties regarding the implications of *jingshen*. It is likely related to their awareness of how adults, or people outside their group would interpret such terms. Chen Rui's experience with *gao zhiliang* is one example:

> Chen Rui: I've received quite a few comments about *gao zhiliang*, but I deleted them.
> Yuanya: Why did you delete them?
> Chen Rui: It's embarrassing. If my older sister saw them, she would scold me all day, saying I'm not studying and just spending all day on *Kuaishou*. She'll think I'm a very *luan* student.

While students perceived terms like *gao zhiliang* as shared language and affirmative remarks within their peer group, adults or people outside their group, such as Chen Rui's older sister, tended to associate them with undesirable attributes, often equating them with the label *luan*. Moreover, Chen Rui's decision to delete such comments reflects how his online practices were subject to adult attitudes and surveillance, which will be further explored in section 7.3.

The rise of *jingshen* as an internet phenomenon appears to parallel and, to some extent, replace an earlier subcultural identity known as *shehui ren* (literally "society person"). Once popular on *Kuaishou*, *shehui ren* referred to marginalised and disenfranchised young people with limited access to stable jobs and formal education (Li et al., 2020; Lv, 2024). In Li et al.'s (2020) study, rural students viewed *shehui ren* as individuals with extensive social experience who relied on physical strength instead of academic success to assert their place in society. While students expressed some admiration for *shehui ren*, they hesitated to identify with its overt "gangster-like" image. As Lv (2024) suggests, *shehui ren* and *jingshen* share similar attributes and lifestyles, both of which are often devalued by mainstream media and urban middle class. The "non-mainstream" stylistic expression associated with *jingshen*, along with its detachment from academic commitment, reinforce its divergence from dominant cultural norms. This likely explains Dai Peng's reference to the "dregs of society" and Chen Rui's sister's negative evaluation of such terms, which reflect adult perceptions of *jingshen* as a symbol of deviance and marginalisation.

Despite expressing ambivalence toward their *jingshen* identity on *Kuaishou*, many participants still attempted to continuously challenge the dominant culture, either explicitly or implicitly. For example, one of Zhaocai's online posts reads:

Just because I'm covered in tattoos doesn't make me a bad person. I'm just as loyal, righteous and benevolent.

While Zhaocai's statement is rather direct and assertive, other participants took a more subtle approach to challenging dominant narratives. For instance, as shown in Post 7, Xiaoshuai's post contrasts the way they were defined by the school with how they defined themselves. It juxtaposes two competing narratives: the institutional framing of his poor academic performance as a defining characteristic of failure and his self-assertion of *jingshen* as a legitimate and positive identity. While his exam scores labelled him as a "bad student" in school, his engagement with *jingshen* culture through digital artifacts and self-expression suggests an alternative mode of validation and self-worth constructed on their own terms.

Taken together, participants built on earlier *jingshen* culture but moved beyond its original, narrowly defined visual codes to develop more flexible and diverse forms of expression. They adopted, reinterpreted and innovated upon existing elements, incorporating new digital aesthetics and linguistic styles. I therefore define this evolving phenomenon as post-*jingshen* culture to capture both its continuity with and divergence from the original *jingshen* forms.

Participants in the study used *Kuaishou* as a platform to experiment with post-*jingshen* identity, selectively drawing on and remixing elements from popular culture and social media trends. In doing so, they constructed a new value system that often challenged or inverted dominant cultural discourses, particularly those surrounding ideal student behaviour and normative youth identities. This can be interpreted as a form of cultural resistance: an effort to reject stigmatising labels and assert alternative, more affirmative self-definitions. Through their reappropriation of cultural materials - both physical and digital - these young people actively created new forms of legitimacy and belonging, where meaning was negotiated within their peer networks rather than defined by institutional or adult authorities. In addition to individualistic self-presentations, the following section shows that participants also displayed social bonds and peer networks they cultivated on *Kuaishou*.
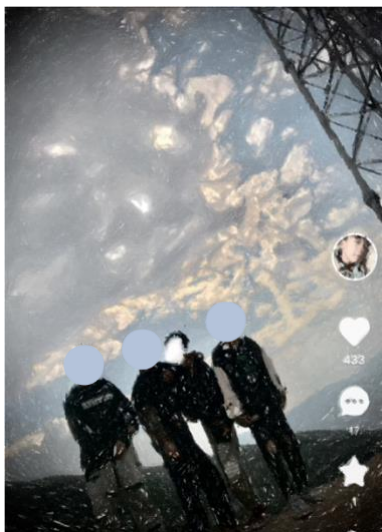
7.1.3 Peer community in post-*jingshen* culture

Figure 9 Online post 8

Post 8 features four young men dressed in baseball jackets, jumpers and stylish jeans. The caption reads: #PostingEvenIfNotPretty. The author, Dai Peng, has obscured his own face with white paint, while the other faces were obscured by me.

Figure 10 Online post 9

Post 9 is posted by Zhaocai and depicts a group of young men sitting together and sharing a meal. The table is filled with barbecue food and beer, and most of them are smoking (faces obscured by me). The text of the image reads: When I make a name for myself one day, I'll be sure to rekindle the bonds of the past. Xiaoshuai shared the same picture on his *Kuaishou* account, captioning it: Being students together, being *shehui* (society) together - you are a lifelong friend, a childhood buddy, and a brother who walks through thick and thin with me. Tag him!

Figure 11 Online post 10

Post 10 is posted by Kaixin and features a group of girls in school uniforms smoking in the school toilets, their faces covered with white paint (applied by herself). The caption reads: We will still stand by each other's side in many years.

Students' online content was largely dominated by selfies and other personal photos, as demonstrated earlier, and group images were notably less common. This was partly due to logistical barriers to meeting up during school holidays, including geographical distance, limited transportation in mountainous areas, and parental restrictions on mobility. Nonetheless, group photos did appear occasionally when students managed to gather on weekends or covertly bring their phones into school.

Posts 8, 9 and 10 offer valuable insight into moments of collective self-presentation within the framework of post-*jingshen* culture. Posts 8 and 9 depict groups of boys on weekend outings, while Post 10 captures a group of girls engaging in a bonding activity at school. In these group photos, stylistic clothing, "cool" poses and behavioural performances all conform to the visual grammar of the post-*jingshen* style. Yet these posts go beyond visual style - they also foreground themes of peer bonds and community.

Relational expressions are particularly evident in Xiaoshuai's caption, which includes phrases such as "lifelong friends", "childhood buddy", and "brother", signalling the affective depth of these relationships. Some participants also referred to close friends as family members in their online expressions despite not being biologically related. In Chinese cultural contexts where kin relations are highly valued (Hinsch, 2013), such language suggests a level of trust that mirrors familial relationships.

The phrase "being *shehui* (society) together" from Xiaoshuai's caption further links their collective identity to the concept of *shehui ren* (society people), previously discussed. This identity is associated with brotherhood, loyalty and social networks as alternative modes of social recognition and belonging (Y. Chen, 2019; Li et al., 2020; Lv, 2024). It is often linked to performative masculinity and physical strength, as seen in the previous chapter involving group fights and aggression, as well as symbolic props like the sword held by Zhaocai in Post 1. Such peer networks offered an alternative sense of community for students marginalised by the mainstream society, functioning as a source of mutual validation and support (Osburg, 2016).

In addition to expressing collective identity and social bonds, these posts also subtly communicate social status dynamics. As Milner Jr (2013) points out, conformity and social association are two major sources of status for teenagers. In Posts 8 and 9, participants displayed a unified stylistic performance that reinforces group cohesion and shared cultural affiliation. Moreover, as discussed in the previous chapter, hierarchical relationships existed within these peer groups. Affiliation with older or higher-status students, such as Xiaoshuai, who was widely regarded as being at the top of the hierarchy, offered a way for students to elevate their own status. These online performances therefore not only reflect offline hierarchies but also demonstrate how social status was negotiated and displayed in the digital space.

Post 10 further illustrates this. Although the creator, Kaixin, obscured all the faces in the image, she tagged senior students in the post which shows her connection to respected figures in the network. This tagging practice became a subtle yet public display of her relational status (Humphreys, 2018). The image's setting – the school toilets – also carries symbolic meaning. As a non-sanctioned location for smoking and photography, it reflects the students' resistance to institutional authority and further asserts the group's *luan* and *jingshen* identity. It demonstrates how participants extended their *luan* identity into the online space. This interplay between online and offline identity-making will be explored further in the next chapter.

In summary, this group of rural youth engaged with post-*jingshen* culture on *Kuaishou* not merely as a stylistic trend but as a meaningful and collective social practice. Through shared visual aesthetics and mutual understandings of what it meant to be *jingshen*, they collectively constructed a cultural identity that fostered group cohesion, peer recognition and a sense of

belonging. Their online practices were not just about individual expression but also cultivating social bonds and reinforcing community within their peer networks. The following section further looks into the relational and emotional dimensions of their digital lives, focusing on expressions of care, intimacy and emotional support on the platform.

7.2 Emotional support and digital intimacy

As mentioned earlier, physical meetups were often difficult for these students outside school. In this context, *Kuaishou* became an important site for sustaining relationships, allowing students to maintain social contact and emotional closeness even when physically apart. Many participants described using the platform to chat, share updates and stay connected with friends during weekends and school holidays, suggesting that *Kuaishou* facilitated ongoing relational engagement that bridged offline and online life.

This emotional continuity was especially evident in the comment sections, which were filled with affectionate and affirming messages. In addition to stylistic compliments like *jingshen,* pretty and *gao zhiliang* (high quality), students frequently used terms of endearment such as "baby" and "miss you". These homogenous and supportive comments reflect shared group norms and a collective investment in maintaining a positive and validating peer community where everyone's participation was affirmed, regardless of the post's content or quality. In this way, *Kuaishou* functioned more than a platform for self-presentation; it served as a mutual support network where social bonds were actively developed through emotional engagement.

The platform also played a significant role as a space for emotional care, particularly during moments of personal distress. In an interview, Xiao Ying explained how she used *Kuaishou* to express difficult emotions and receive comfort:

> Yuanya: So, you just mentioned that using *Kuaishou* helps you vent your emotions?
>
> Xiao Ying: Yeah, like posting a sad video.
>
> Yuanya: What will happen then?
>
> Xiao Ying: Some friends would come to talk to me and ask me what's wrong and comfort me.
>
> Yuanya: How do you feel about it?
>
> Xiao Ying: I feel warm inside.

Xiao Ying's account illustrates how digital interactions on *Kuaishou* can provide meaningful emotional care, enabling users to share their struggles and seek validation from peers. Similarly, Miao Han described finding comfort in a *wangyou* - an online friend she met through the platform but had never met in person. During difficult periods, such as experiencing parental conflict or bullying at school, she turned to this friend for emotional support and reassurance. For students like Miao Han, whose offline social networks may be limited or lack trustworthiness, these online relationships became a vital source of care and understanding (Pascoe et al., 2009).

These examples demonstrate how *Kuaishou* can function as an emotional refuge, offering a space where young people can express vulnerability and receive affirmation from peers. Moreover, the ability to connect with like-minded individuals beyond one's immediate physical and social environment - outside the constraints of school, family, or local community - highlights the expansive potential of digital spaces.

7.2.1 Quantifying closeness: intimacy scores

Another key aspect of students' digital engagement on *Kuaishou* was the expression and quantification of romantic and emotional intimacy. These expressions ranged from public declarations of affection and relationship milestones to breakups and displays of closeness through the platform's "intimacy score" feature. This section focuses on the "intimacy score" feature that was widely used by participants in the study.

As briefly noted in the previous chapter, Li Yun's *Kuaishou* profile was heavily centred on romantic relationships. One notable example involved him showcasing his "intimacy score" with a girlfriend he met online. This score - a gamified feature offered by the platform - numerically tracks the perceived strength of a relationship. On *Kuaishou*, users can categorise their connections as friends, romantic partners, or family members. The intimacy score system itself is structured around interaction: points increase through ongoing engagement between users and are further amplified by external validation, such as receiving "calls" (forms of support or attention) from others. Over time, accumulating points unlocks new relationship "grades" or titles, visually signalling the depth of a relationship. This gamification of closeness introduces an element of competition and performance, where higher scores signify stronger or more valued relationships.

These scores and titles were widely shared and celebrated, and it has become a routine social practice within the community. Participants often posted screenshots of their relationship levels, not just for romantic partners, but also for close friends, to publicly affirm their social bonds. For instance, Xiao Xia proudly described reaching level 20 with a friend, earning them the title *Bawang Jiemei* (Overlord Sisters), a term connoting fierce loyalty and deep connection. Similarly, Zhang Mili reached the same level with her friend Ma Juan. These titles represent not only the numerical score but also the perceived strength and exclusivity of the relationship.

In this context, the public display of relationships on *Kuaishou* is not merely a personal expression of intimacy but also a form of social performance (Kaplan, 2021; Lambert, 2016). These visible displays serve as markers of participation in the wider peer culture and offer a means of gaining validation from other group members. Showcasing "intimacy scores" is one such example: by quantifying and publicising relational bonds, participants not only affirmed their closeness with each other but also signalled their active engagement in shared digital practices. This helped them position themselves as valued members of the community, reinforcing personal connection and group belonging.

7.3 Contested space: negotiating boundaries

The preceding sections highlighted how students expressed cultural identity and intimacy on *Kuaishou* with a degree of autonomy. However, these digital practices were far from unregulated. While online spaces appeared to offer an alternative site of self-expression, students' behaviours were continually shaped and at times constrained by adult surveillance, institutional norms and platform censorship. This mirrored the control they experienced in the school setting, showing how systems of authority extended into digital life.

Digital engagement was often dismissed by adults as a distraction from studies, thus adding little of value. Zhang Zhen, for example, recalled a moment when a teacher publicly mocked him for his activity on *Kuaishou*:

> I posted on *Kuaishou*, and my teacher recognised me. [The teacher] mocked me in front of the class, saying, "You know nothing about studying, but you're the first one to post on *Kuaishou*." After that, I rarely posted videos, sharing only images instead. I

thought about blocking my teacher and even checked the viewing history, but I couldn't find [the teacher's] account, so I wasn't able to do so.

Zhang Zhen's experience, again, highlights how academic performance was positioned as the only legitimate focus for students, with other forms of activities framed as deviant. Teachers were often able to identify students' accounts through *Kuaishou*'s "nearby" function or algorithmic recommendations. Several other participants reported similar experiences, especially when their posts featured *luan* behaviours, such as public displays of romantic relationships or pictures taken in the school setting, where mobile phone use was prohibited. Such content could lead to disciplinary action or further scrutiny.

Surveillance was not limited to teachers. Family members and local communities also monitored the students' online activities. Luo Cheng, for example, expressed concern about being seen smoking or drinking in videos that could be accessed by his parents. Zhaocai faced judgment from people in his village for posting images of his tattoos on *Kuaishou*. These examples show how online visibility could lead to offline consequences, particularly when digital expressions deviated from dominant cultural norms.

In addition to adult surveillance, participants also encountered formal platform regulations. Kaixin expressed frustration:

> Some posts can't be published because the platform automatically sets them to private, like if the content includes smoking, knives, or even two people kissing. That's the most frustrating part.

Like Kaixin, many participants developed awareness of the platform's regulations through direct experiences with content removal. Xiaoshuai, for example, uploaded a picture of himself holding a knife but it was soon deleted by the platform. Similarly, Dai Peng recounted an instance in which he posted a photo of himself smoking, only to have it set to private by the platform's automated moderation system.

In China, platform governance operates under state regulatory power, which circumscribes platform-based cultural production (Lin & de Kloet, 2019; Zhou & Liu, 2024). This means that content moderation and regulation on platforms like *Kuaishou* reflect state policies and ideological frameworks. While individualism and creativity are encouraged on *Kuaishou*, they are subject to constraints, particularly when produced by children and young people

under 18. For example, content created by a group of marginalised young people, including *shehui ren*-themed posts, was removed from *Kuaishou* and other social media platforms due to its perceived aesthetic and moral vulgarity, which was deemed misaligned with state ideology (Hou, 2020; Li et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, participants demonstrated resourcefulness in circumventing platform censorship. Zhaocai, for instance, strategically used hashtags to bypass content moderation:

> Yuanya: I noticed that you sometimes add hashtags like *#WaterproofTattooStickers*. Did you create this hashtag yourself?
> Zhaocai: If you're posting a tattoo photo and you add this hashtag, your post is less likely to be deleted. Otherwise, it might get removed or set to "friends-only".
> Yuanya: How did you know that?
> Zhaocai: I tried it once. When I first posted, *Kuaishou* flagged it as violating the rules. So, I deleted it, added this hashtag, and then it successfully got published.

In addition to the tattoo hashtags, another commonly used one is #PropCigarette indicating that the cigarette in the video or photo is a fake cigarette rather than a real one. Furthermore, students also developed tactics in response to adult surveillance, such as blocking specific adult users to limit their content's visibility, creating multiple accounts to curate different types of content for different audiences, and adjusting privacy settings such as setting accounts to private during the school days and reopening them on weekends to lower the possibilities of detection by teachers.

In summary, despite the perception of online spaces as personal domains, young people's digital practices on *Kuaishou* remain subject to multiple layers of surveillance and control - from school authorities and family members to platform regulations and the state's control. However, rather than passively accepting these constraints, participants actively navigated and negotiated them by employing creative strategies to reclaim their agency. Their actions reflect the complex, negotiated nature of digital youth culture in China, where self-expression is continuously asserted, policed and reimagined within contested sociotechnical boundaries.

7.4 New mechanisms of mediated recognition

Building on the findings discussed so far, I summarised three key mechanisms of mediated recognition on social media, which are (1) the establishment of a recognisable self-

presentation through imitated and networked publics; (2) the development of an affirmative and emotionally supportive community through intimate publics; and (3) a form of datafied recognition through measurable popularity. In what follows, I will discuss each of them.

7.4.1 Imitated and networked publics: establishing a recognisable self-presentation

As previously discussed, participants in the study constructed a collective form of culture, which I define as post-*jingshen* culture in which they employed visual, textual and acoustic markers to signify their distinctive identity deviant from the mainstream youth culture. Drawing on recognition theory, I argue that students' engagement with post-*jingshen* culture is not merely an act of subcultural production but a strategic effort to establish a recognisable self-presentation. This visibility helped secure validation, social belonging and group solidarity, contributing to their sense of self-worth. I propose that such recognition was shaped through the interplay of two types of publics: *imitated publics* and *networked publics*. Both forms shape digital participation in distinct but intersecting ways.

As outlined in Chapter 2, Zulli and Zulli's (2020) concept of imitated publics refers to digital collectives that form not through interpersonal connections but through rituals of replication, where users engage in shared cultural practices by imitating existing content. Departing from the perspective of how the techno-social configurations of *TikTok* shape users' behaviours and sociality, Zulli and Zulli (2020) found that the publics formed online are shaped by the platform features that encourage content imitation and repetition, such as likes, shares, filters and sound effects through which users establish networks with people who use the same internet memes or artifacts.

Similar patterns were observed in this study as *Kuaishou* shares a technological design and affordances with *TikTok*. Participants engaged in highly ritualised self-presentation characterised by aesthetic and linguistic homogeneity, as shown earlier. Their posts frequently incorporated popular captions, filters, and music tracks - often recommended algorithmically. Sometimes, a few individual participants acted as early adopters of new trends, setting precedents for others to follow. Imitation, in this context, was not passive mimicry but an intentional act of alignment with a shared cultural code that signified affiliation with post-*jingshen* identity. These repeated, recognisable forms of expression functioned as cultural markers, making individuals visible within a collective aesthetic grammar and thereby socially legible and validated.

While imitated publics foreground stylistic convergence, networked publics emphasise the relational and interactive dimensions of digital participation (boyd, 2014). Defined as publics formed through networked technologies and shaped by their affordances - persistence, visibility, spreadability, and searchability - networked publics also constitute imagined communities where identities are shaped through ongoing interaction. Contrary to Zulli and Zulli's (2020) view that video-sharing platforms often downplay interpersonal connections, *Kuaishou* users in this study actively utilised the platform's interactive features to maintain peer relationships and enhance social bonding. Their exchanges, especially within friend groups, were integral to shaping and sustaining identity performances.

Their self-presentation on *Kuaishou* exemplifies what Bhandari and Bimo (2022) term the "algorithmised self" - a form of identity shaped through iterative engagement with one's own prior digital personas, which are curated and circulated by the platform's personalised algorithm. At the same time, the platform's architectural design positions the individual as the central point of interaction, facilitating ongoing forms of social connection. This dynamic aligns with Papacharissi's (2010) notion of the "networked self", which emerges through socially embedded interactions enabled by digital connectivity. Participants were frequently exposed to content and users whose identity performances mirrored their own, resulting in a recursive process of self-making. Through these algorithmically mediated encounters and socially driven interactions, participants also engaged in a reflexive process of affiliation and recognition. In doing so, they simultaneously reinforced both their individual self-concepts and a shared sense of group belonging.

Together, the concepts of imitated publics and networked publics provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how recognisable self-presentation is produced, circulated and validated on *Kuaishou*. While imitated publics facilitated aesthetic cohesion through shared performative styles, networked publics supported relational affirmation through interaction. Participants' digital practices reflected the intersection of both: their engagement with post-*jingshen* culture entailed adopting platform-specific stylistic codes that were highly visible and easily replicable, while also embedding their content within dynamic social relationships. Essentially, these practices were not merely expressions of individual identity, but socio-technically mediated processes of recognition, negotiation and collective identity formation.

7.4.2 Intimate publics: mutual recognition through emotional validation

As previously discussed, participants frequently expressed emotional attachment and interpersonal closeness in their digital practices on *Kuaishou*. While intimacy has traditionally been framed in terms of romantic or sexual relationships confined to the private sphere, recent scholarship has broadened the concept to include a wider spectrum of personal ties such as friendships and non-kin connections (Chambers, 2013). In this study, intimacy is understood in this expanded sense, encompassing various forms of connection and affection beyond conventional romantic frameworks.

I argue that participants cultivated what can be described as *intimate publics* - digitally mediated communities grounded in emotional exchange and reciprocity, through which mutual recognition is enacted. This emotional validation manifested in two main ways: first, through direct expressions of care and closeness between individuals; and second, through affirming responses from a broader peer audience engaging in these interactions.

Social media has become central platforms for emotional self-disclosure and expressions of attachment (Chambers, 2013; Hjorth & Arnold, 2013). Many participants reported expressing affection more openly and frequently online than in their offline lives, suggesting that digital spaces afford modes of affective communication often constrained in physical settings. The sheer volume and frequency of online interactions play a crucial role in maintaining and deepening intimacy. As previously mentioned, some participants referred to one another as chosen family. These forms of digital intimacy reconfigured social ties beyond biological or institutional affiliations, offering alternatives to the pre-defined familial and educational relationships that structured the participants' offline experiences.

Such online networks provided relational spaces where recognition was grounded in emotional reciprocity and mutual care. Expressions of friendship, brotherhood and romantic attachment were not merely extensions of offline ties, but also subtle critiques of the conditional nature of institutional approval. These affective connections served as what Hinton and Hjorth (2013, p. 3) describe as "a glue for social relationships", satisfying emotional needs that were often unmet in participants' offline lives, particularly within the school setting, as discussed in Chapter 5. In this way, intimate publics functioned as alternative support systems, where recognition was achieved through emotional investment, mutual affirmation, and sustained connection.

Furthermore, *Kuaishou* also enabled participants to expand their social circles beyond their existing offline relationships. As shown earlier, the platform facilitated new friendships and romantic connections, allowing young people to access emotional support and recognition beyond their immediate physical environment. This translocal sociality suggests that social media does not simply mirror offline relationships but actively reshapes social connectivity. Many such relationships were maintained through frequent digital interaction, highlighting how sustained engagement and expressions of care were essential to maintaining intimacy. Participants thus formed their own intimate circles that spanned both offline and online-only connections.

The second dimension of *intimate publics* concerns the *publicness* of affective expression. Participants often publicly shared the closeness or status of their relationships, such as through the display of "intimacy scores", as discussed earlier. On *Kuaishou*, intimacy was not confined to private exchanges but frequently enacted in public, visible to audiences beyond those directly involved (Kaplan, 2021; Lambert, 2016). Kaplan (2021) likens this to a "theatre-in-the-round" where not only are performances witnessed, but audience members also observe and respond to one another, becoming part of the performance themselves. On *Kuaishou*, visibly interactive acts of affection from audiences such as likes, comments and memes functioned as markers of support, reinforcing the affective bonds on display. In this way, public performances of intimacy helped shape the norms around how intimacy should be expressed and received.

Participants developed a repertoire of standardised communicative codes for expressing care and affirmation. These phatic expressions such as compliments and affirmations of loyalty extended across all content, not just posts explicitly about relationships. Such interaction operated as a form of gift exchange, where expressions of validation were both offered and expected. As a result, intimate ties were publicly acknowledged and legitimised, strengthening not only individual relationships but also a collective sense of belonging. In this way, one-to-one intimacy extended into a broader community, where participants were recognised as emotionally valued and socially connected individuals.

However, not all participants perceived such interactions as entirely sincere. Some saw them as part of an unspoken social norm and noted a disconnect between online affirmation and offline behaviour. Several acknowledged that some comments were more performative than genuine, particularly when online support was not reflected in physical interactions.

Nevertheless, most participants continued to conform to these cultural norms. As Hjorth and Arnold (2013) argue, phatic expressions of affection can still play a crucial role in the cultivation of intimacy. Whether this culture of intimacy and affirmation can provide sufficient conditions for mutual recognition will be explored in Chapter 8.

In summary, participants' engagement in digital intimacies on *Kuaishou* illustrates how social media operates as key mediators of emotional expression and recognition. By cultivating intimate publics, these young people developed a shared culture of mutual care and support, where recognition was rooted in emotional expression and affirmation. Their public performances of intimacy extended personal ties into wider social relationships, enabling them to be recognised both as emotionally significant individuals and as valued members of a supportive community. In this way, the affective machinery of *Kuaishou* created space for the articulation of mutual recognition grounded in relational reciprocity and emotionally visible connections.

7.4.3 Measurable popularity: datafied recognition

A key motivation for participants in the study to share posts on *Kuaishou* was the desire to receive interactive feedback from others. Engagement metrics - likes, comments, and views - play a crucial role in their digital practices by quantifying popularity and social approval. As observed, participants actively employed various strategies to maximise their visibility and engagement. These strategies include using trending hashtags, posting at specific times for greater reach, keep their accounts public rather than private, managing multiple accounts to experiment with different content, and directly sending posts to friends to invite comments. Some participants even engaged in "buying engagement" - paying for likes and comments to artificially boost their perceived popularity. These practices demonstrated their nuanced understanding of the platform's algorithmic mechanisms, as well as their skills in capturing successful strategies observed both within their peer networks and the wider *Kuaishou* community.

Among these efforts, one of the most aspirational achievements was *shang remen* (making it to the trending page). If a post receives sufficient engagement, it may be featured on the platform's trending page, exposing it to a much larger audience. Participants viewed this as a marker of digital success and an informal badge of honour symbolising their popularity. Yet, unlike the young people in Li et al.'s (2020) study who aspired to become online celebrities, most participants in the study had more constrained expectations regarding their popularity.

They recognised that their online presence remained largely confined to their own peer communities and thus *shang remen* was a rare achievement for ordinary users like themselves. Nevertheless, within their communities, accumulating a few hundred likes and dozens of comments was still seen as a meaningful achievement. When this level of engagement was not achieved, participants would often delete, modify, or re-upload their posts. Even without large-scale reach, they consistently negotiated their self-presentation and invested in optimising their engagement metrics.

As Reckwitz (2020) observes, one key characteristic of digital media is the structural asymmetry between the overproduction of cultural goods and the scarcity of attention. This imbalance drives users to actively compete for visibility within crowded digital spaces. While the primary audience for these young people's posts was their peer group, the algorithmic architecture of *Kuaishou* also enabled their content to reach a broader, often unknown audience. Even when posts did not garner many likes or comments outside their networks, view counts remained significant. For many participants, the accumulation of views functioned as a symbolic marker of achievement and suggested that their content, and by extension, their digital presence, was worthy of attention.

According to Honneth (in Honneth & Margalit, 2001), visibility is a precondition for recognition: it involves being perceived in terms of personal attributes that invite positive evaluation. Although it is uncertain what exactly constitutes a "view" on *Kuaishou* - whether it results from a post being recommended on the front page or from a user actively clicking and engaging with the content - this ambiguity is ultimately inconsequential. What matters here is the perceived value participants attached to being seen. The perception that a post had reached a wider audience, even anonymously, offered symbolic validation. It implied that their contribution had value, thus affirming their presence within the wider digital community. This sense of translocal connectivity - of being seen beyond one's immediate circle - enhanced the meaningfulness of digital visibility. Therefore, I argue that such online visibility can be interpreted as a form of recognition.

Importantly, the individual pursuit of visibility on social media is deeply entangled with the techno-economic architecture of the platform (Jansson, 2015). This means that users have limited autonomy in securing such forms of recognition, as their visibility is shaped by algorithmic decisions beyond their control. Furthermore, visibility is often a prerequisite for other engagement metrics such as likes and comments - one must be seen to be liked or

commented on. In this sense, visibility not only functions as recognition in itself but also as the foundational condition for further forms of affirmational interactions.

Compared to view counts which are often visible only to the content creator, other metrics such as the number of followers, likes, comments, and intimacy scores are publicly accessible and thus carry more explicit implications regarding how one's digital presence is received by others. These interactive metrics can be understood as "expressive gestures of recognition". Originally, Honneth (in Honneth & Margalit, 2001) used this concept to refer to facial expressions and gestures beyond spoken language in face-to-face interactions. In the context of mediated communication, however, the meaning of expressive gestures can be extended to encompass all forms of affirmative digital interaction, as these visible and quantifiable metrics are frequently framed as indicators of social approval (Bell, 2019).

Furthermore, as Honneth (in Honneth & Margalit, 2001) argues, different types of gestures may indicate different assessment of value that the subject is able to extend to the other person. In the digital context, "likes" and "comments" can be interpreted as carrying different degrees of emotional investment. While a "like" may indicate basic acknowledgement or minimal approval, a comment often signals deeper emotional investment, as well as the potential for further interaction. This distinction helps explain why participants more frequently exchanged comments within close peer circles and rarely received them from strangers. It also accounts for the practice of inviting friends to comment - an effort to enhance perceived intimacy and strengthen peer bonds through visible, public affirmation.

The platform's intimacy score system further exemplifies how digital recognition is quantified and datafied. Calculated based on the users' own interactions and those of their audiences, this system encourages ongoing engagement by assigning a measurable value to relational closeness. Higher scores suggest stronger relational ties and signal social value. In this context, affection is not only expressed but also accumulated and displayed as a measurable asset. The intimacy score reflects two intertwined forms of value production: the cultivation of emotional bonds and the generation of platform activity (Dobson et al., 2018). Recognition, therefore, hinges not only on the quality of one's relationships but also on their productivity in terms of platform metrics. As a result, young users' affective labour became aligned with the platform's logic of quantification, where social recognition is achieved through sustained interaction and data generation.

These metrics, including views, likes, follower counts and intimacy scores have become symbolic currencies of social acceptance and affirmation, making recognition on *Kuaishou* a datafied and measurable experience (Campanella, 2024; Ceilutka, 2022). These digital practices were not simply about accumulating popularity but about navigating a complex social terrain of recognition shaped by algorithmic systems and socio-technical affordances (Jansson, 2015). This was evident in participants' constant adjustments to their self-presentation and content strategies based on their understanding of how the system worked. Through this process, they established a presence within a peer-driven digital culture while also managing algorithmic visibility. In this sense, the internet can be understood as a "recognition market" (Baroncelli & Freitas, 2011), where individuals actively craft their digital presentation and compete for attention and affirmation. Each follower gained, each like received, and each comment posted contributed to an accumulated sense of self-worth. Participation in this cycle of content production, feedback, and strategic adaptation enabled participants to experience a form of continuous self-affirmation, shaped simultaneously by social interactions and the platform's infrastructural logic.

As Ceilutka (2022) argues, social media platforms facilitate every aspect of recognition. Compared to face-to-face interactions, the datafied nature of these platforms enables individuals to quantify their social value, transforming abstract notions of approval, belonging, and self-worth into tangible and measurable indicators. Structural affordances such as likes, comments and intimacy scores have reshaped the dynamics of recognition by rendering it both measurable and comparative within peer networks. Despite being subject to the algorithmic control and commercial logic of platform infrastructures, young people in this study demonstrated agency in navigating these constraints. They developed context-specific strategies to optimise their engagement, negotiate identity and pursue recognition through digitally mediated sociality.

To sum up, this section shows how young people's digital practices on *Kuaishou* were driven by a desire for popularity and social approval enacted through platform metrics. These quantifiable indicators served as symbolic and social forms of validation, enabling participants to feel seen, affirmed and valued. Through strategic engagement, self-presentation and emotional exchange, they navigated the platform's algorithmic and socio-technical structures to cultivate visibility and reinforce peer relationships. In this sense,

recognition on *Kuaishou* became a datafied process, shaped and mediated by the platform logic and quantifiable metrics.

7.4.4 Summary of mediated recognition

Social media-mediated recognition is shaped by both the architectural design of digital platforms and the ways in which users interact with, interpret, and (re)appropriate these technologies. This dual dynamic reflects what Van Dijck (2013) conceptualises as the interplay between automated connectivity and human networks, where platform affordances and algorithmic logics structure certain types of interactions, while users exercise agency in negotiating these structures in everyday practices (Miguel, 2018).

In this study, I have theorised digitally mediated recognition, specifically, social media-mediated recognition as expressed through the interrelated dynamics of networked, imitated, and intimate publics, alongside the logic of datafied popularity. In other words, the struggle for recognition among peers on social media was channelled through different forms of publics where specific modes of sociality and self-presentation have been normalised and legitimised; while simultaneously being shaped by the platform's datafied mechanisms that quantify engagement and visibility.

Specifically, networked publics enabled connectivity and circulation; imitated publics encouraged the replication of platform-specific and culturally normative behaviours; and intimate publics fostered emotionally charged, relational interactions. Together, these publics facilitated datafied recognition, as online users' collective practices contributed to the production of algorithmically favoured content and increased engagement metrics. In this way, imitated, networked, and intimate publics do not operate in isolation but co-construct a digital environment where recognition is both socially meaningful and technically quantified.

As Hjorth and Arnold (2013) describe, a public is "a collective that overarches and subsumes its individual constituents to self-construct a new social actor with a sense of collective self" (p. 123). In the context of this study, young people participated in shared cultures of expression and collectively created group norms that emerged from the entanglement of individual agency and technological systems. Through these collective practices, they constructed alternative structures of recognition that affirmed their sense of self-worth, identity, and social belonging within digitally mediated spaces.

7.5 Chapter summary

In summary, this chapter explores how rural youth engaged with *Kuaishou* to assert agency, express cultural identity and seek recognition in a digitally mediated environment. It first examines the emergence of post-*jingshen* culture as a collective digital identity, marked by shared stylistic expressions, cultural norms and understandings. Through consistent aesthetic practices and mutual engagement, participants cultivated a sense of belonging and community online. The chapter then analysed how *Kuaishou* served as a space for emotional connection, where expressions of care, support and affirmation were central to participants' social interactions. Next, the chapter discusses how participants navigated adult surveillance and platform censorship and how they employed creative strategies to maintain visibility and autonomy. Building on these findings, the chapter identified three key mechanisms through which recognition is mediated on social media: (1) the establishment of a recognisable self-presentation through imitated and networked publics; (2) the development of an affirmative and emotionally supportive community through intimate publics; and (3) a form of datafied recognition through measurable popularity.

Together, these insights demonstrate how digital platforms like *Kuaishou* can reconfigure young people's struggles for recognition. While these mediated forms of recognition can offer validation and foster a sense of community, they are also entangled with technological affordances and constraints that can limit the users' autonomy. As such, similar to the question raised in the previous chapter, a critical question remains: do these forms of mediated recognition offer sufficient conditions for the development of healthy self-relations? This question will be explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 8 Disrespect and recognition: youth struggles across school and social media

Chapter overview

Building on the findings presented in Chapters 5 to 7, this chapter offers a more in-depth discussion of the key themes. It begins with a discussion of disrespect at school, situating these experiences within broader societal structures of recognition and introducing various categorisations to provide a more nuanced understanding of disrespect. The chapter then explores the interconnection between two countercultural identities developed by participants - *luan* culture at school and post-*jingshen* culture on *Kuaishou*. The final section examines the extent to which the students' creation of alternative recognition structures through their subcultural communities fosters sufficient conditions for self-realisation.

8.1 Disrespect at school

Although limited research has applied recognition theory and the concept of disrespect to understand students' schooling experiences, the findings of this study resonate with several existing studies that explore students' experiences of exclusion and marginalisation at school. For example, Moensted (2022) found that disengaged students in Australia who struggled academically often felt undervalued, unsupported, and invisible within their school environments. Similarly, Sime et al. (2021) highlighted the importance students placed on being cared for, supported, and recognised. While their study acknowledged negative experiences such as exclusion and inequalities in recognition, it did not fully explore how such experiences impact students' development of self-understanding and identity.

In addition, Hargreaves et al. (2024) studied lower-attaining primary school children in the UK and found that these students frequently felt excluded, marginalised, or overlooked in interactions with both peers and teachers. This led them to perceive themselves as less worthy or of lower status compared to their high-achieving peers. Hargreaves et al. (2024) note that these students

> construct themselves, and are constructed by others, as less worthy, less connected, more different and less visible than others; how they identify themselves is not respected by all... they encounter systems, or common practices, that fail to confer

respect equally to all categories of people and the qualities associated with them. (p. 4)

Participants in this study shared similar experiences of exclusion and marginalisation within the school system. They were labelled by teachers and internalised these labels themselves as "bad" or *luan*, perceiving themselves as inferior and undeserving of equal treatment or attention. Ogbu (2004) argues that such marginalisation often stems from "external forces that mark a group of people as a distinct segment from the rest of the population" (p. 4). In the context of this study, these external forces are reflected in a dominant recognition order that privileges academic performance and exam-oriented competencies.

Within such a system, failure in school assessments can render students as individuals of diminished social value. Academic success is widely seen as the key to securing the credentials necessary for a socially accepted version of the "good life" (Roe, 2022). This belief reflects broader societal expectations that closely link education, occupational status and aspirations for the "good life". Thus, the school's recognition order is not isolated but deeply embedded within the wider social and economic order.

Honneth (2007a) similarly argues that the "good life" is intrinsically tied to social esteem - recognition gained through one's contribution to society, particularly via economically productive labour. As he states:

> The acquisition of that form of recognition that I have called social esteem continues to be bound up with the opportunity to pursue an economically rewarding and thus socially regulated occupation. (Honneth, 2007a, p. 75)

In this sense, the value that society places on different forms of labour becomes a central determinant of recognition and social status. For many students in this study, the institutional order and adult expectations continually reinforced the dominant discourse that upward mobility was attainable only through educational success. This pathway was seen as a way to avoid the repetition of their parents' life trajectories, which often involved low-status, physically demanding work. This was further reflected in the participants' own expressions (see Chapter 5), where they articulated desires for non-manual, less precarious employment. These expressions demonstrate their acute awareness of the existing recognition structure in the labour market.

It suggests that the marginalisation this group of students experienced within the school's recognition structure is not temporary. Rather, it may continue to shape their trajectories beyond school, especially in contexts such as employment and social mobility. Disrespect experienced in the classroom can potentially have long-term implications, contributing to a sustained sense of inferiority and exclusion in broader societal structures. How this group of students navigates recognition structures after leaving school, especially as they transition into the workforce can be another topic worth investigating in the future.

8.1.1 Categorisation of disrespect

As discussed in Chapter 5, I identified three primary forms of disrespect experienced by students: (1) lack of care and instances of abuse, (2) unequal treatment, and (3) feelings of being undervalued. Each corresponds to different modes of recognition and shapes distinct self-relations. However, these forms of disrespect are often interconnected rather than mutually exclusive. Some instances of teacher-student interaction may involve more than one form of disrespect, and the categorisation presented in Chapter 5 highlights the predominant aspect rather than suggesting that only one form is relevant.

For example, corporal punishment not only violates students' physical integrity but also constitutes a denial of their legal rights, since such practices are explicitly prohibited under China's education laws. Similarly, when students were systematically placed at the back of classrooms, or even denied access to classes entirely, they experienced not only unequal treatment but also devaluation and a lack of trust in their abilities and potential, effectively marking them as inferior or unworthy of full participation in the school community.

Building on Honneth's framework, several scholars have proposed different typologies to understand the mechanisms of disrespect. A key distinction is between non-recognition and malrecognition (or misrecognition), as discussed by Bingham (2001), Kauppinen (2002) and Jeznik (2015). Non-recognition refers to a passive form of disrespect - an absence of acknowledgement of one's attributes or achievements. In contrast, malrecognition (or misrecognition) is an active form of disrespect or negative acknowledgement, where individuals are perceived in ways that distort or diminish their sense of self. Malrecognition is particularly harmful because it undermines self-worth and disrupts the development of healthy self-relations (Jeznik, 2015).

Students in this study encountered both forms, but malrecognition emerged as particularly salient. Many students rarely received affirmation from teachers, either for academic efforts or non-academic strengths, suggesting a pattern of non-recognition. As Honneth (2002) argues, individuals come to identify the attributes they possess through intersubjective recognition. When students are deprived of affirmation, they struggle to see their attributes as valuable and to identify themselves as unique individuals. Yet more crucially, many of their attributes were not simply overlooked; they were actively devalued. Students whose ways of being deviated from the idealised image of the compliant, high-achieving student were not just ignored but explicitly discredited. This represents malrecognition: when the withdrawal of recognition is offered in a form that undermines identity and worth.

Renault (2007) further unpacks the concept of disrespect by identifying three distinct forms: devaluation, stigmatisation, and disqualification. Devaluation occurs when individuals are positioned as inferior within hierarchical social relations, which students experienced routinely in interactions with teachers. Stigmatisation, a more overt and damaging form of devaluation, was evident in teachers' use of public criticism, derogatory labelling, and at times, corporal punishment. Finally, disqualification occurs when individuals are not perceived as legitimate participants in social interaction. This form of disrespect undermines a person's basic right to be acknowledged as a member of the community. A clear example came from Miao Han's account in Chapter 5: she recounted how a school leader approached another student but entirely bypassed her, directing greetings only to the other student. Despite being physically present, she was not acknowledged or addressed, subtly yet powerfully signalling that she did not meet the implicit criteria for being a partner in interaction.

This kind of disrespect through disqualification can be even more morally harmful than overt disciplinary actions. As mentioned in Chapter 5, teachers often justified such disciplinary measures as being "for the student's own good" with intentions to correct behaviour via coercive compliance or encourage academic improvement. Many students were aware of these intentions, even when they found the treatment harsh or humiliating. However, when teachers ceased to discipline or even ignore certain students entirely, this signals a more profound form of exclusion, in which the students became invisible and no longer part of the teachers' sphere of concern. In effect, this withdrawal of recognition delegitimised their

presence as students and as human subjects, reinforcing a feeling of alienation and detachment.

Furthermore, Giles (2017) distinguishes between normative discrimination and pathological recognition. Normative discrimination occurs when recognition norms frame certain traits - often linked to class, gender, or race - as undesirable, thereby marginalising individuals based on these attributes. Pathological recognition, on the other hand, describes a recognition order that narrowly defines what is valued, thereby excluding those who deviate from these standards. While those who conform are affirmed, others are rendered invisible or deviant. This notion is particularly useful in the context of this study, where institutional norms within the school privileged academic performance and behavioural conformity, leaving little room for alternative expressions of identity. As Honneth (2012) asserts, "institutions can be understood as embodiments of the specific form of recognition that subjects accord each other on the basis of specific evaluative qualities" (p. 84). In this sense, intersubjective recognition is shaped by institutionalised norms (Hirvonen, 2022). Ikäheimo (2015) refers to this as the influence of a "third party" in intersubjective recognition: a mediating force that structures how intersubjective recognition unfolds between individuals. In this study, the dominant culture of the school and the broader society acted as this third party, shaping both teacher-student and peer interactions in ways that consistently devalued certain students.

This points to another important distinction made by Ikäheimo (2015) between conditional and unconditional recognition. Conditional recognition is based on what individuals can offer including performance, achievement, or conformity, while unconditional recognition affirms individuals for their intentions and inherent worth, regardless of outcomes. In the school setting, recognition was often conditional. Students were valued only when they met certain evaluative criteria such as academic success. Even when some students expressed effort and participated in class, their lack of achievement would often mean that their efforts were overlooked. Ikäheimo (2015) suggests that only unconditional recognition treats the recognisee as a fully individualised subject - someone seen not for their instrumental value but for their irreducible worth as a human being. The fact that students in the study were recognised primarily through conditional frameworks reinforced a narrow conception of value and identity, which promotes hierarchies of value and encourages homogeneity in the school environment (Bingham, 2001).

As Honneth's theory of recognition suggests, finding positive meaning in intersubjective relationships is central to one's self-conception, and the absence of affirmation erodes individuals' sense of value and purpose. Negative emotional reactions such as boredom and frustration can function as an indicator for the subject that certain forms of recognition have been withdrawn from them. As discussed in Chapter 5, these students often described their everyday school life as boring and marked by a sense of meaningless presence or *nanzai* (hard to endure). These feelings should not be dismissed as mere academic disinterest or disengagement; rather, they signal a deeper sense of not belonging - moral and emotional responses to the denial of recognition they felt in the school setting. Importantly, these moral injuries also served as a motivational basis for students to seek alternative spaces where they could experience what many referred to as "a sense of presence" (see Chapter 6).

This "sense of presence" can be theorised as positive moral emotions arising from mutual recognition. One of the few contexts where students experienced this meaningful presence was through peer relationships, especially with those who shared similar experiences of disregard and marginalisation. Through shared practices, status and values, they formed an affective community that offered support and validation, enabling them to assert individual worth outside the school's dominant recognition order. As Bingham (2001) puts it, "students need affirmation of their cultural horizons in the public space of school. They need to be reflected well, that is to say, well recognised by others" (p. 142).

Participants' construction of peer-based recognition has been explored in detail in Chapters 6 and 7, within the contexts of school and social media respectively. In the following section, I move beyond treating these contexts as separate and instead focus on the interplay between them.

8.2 Online-offline interplay: connecting *luan* to post-*jingshen*

Chapters 6 and 7 discussed how participants in the study developed *luan* culture at school and post-*jingshen* culture on *Kuaishou*, through which they formed peer-based recognition and found a sense of belonging and self-worth in their community. In this section, I argue that students' creation of *post-jingshen* culture can be understood as a digital extension of *luan* culture at school. Moreover, the digital space in which students developed post-*jingshen* culture functioned in parallel to informal school spaces - such as the toilets - both serving as arenas for performing countercultural identities away from adults' gaze. Importantly, both the

luan identity and the post-*jingshen* culture functioned as what Honneth (1995) describes as "shared semantics" - a collectively developed interpretative framework through which students made sense of their experiences of marginalisation within school and the wider social context. These shared understandings enabled the formation of peer-led norms and alternative value systems that subtly challenged dominant school discourses. In doing so, they reconfigured social relations and cultivated spaces where they could feel loved, respected, and esteemed - experiences often denied to them in formal school interactions.

As observed in this study, participants' online presentation is largely framed by their offline everyday practices. This echoes previous research on the continuity between online and offline cultural production (boyd, 2014; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Wilson & Atkinson, 2005). Young people's appropriation of physical space can act as a prism through which to understand their use of digital media (Hodkinson & Lincoln, 2008). Similar to informal spaces like toilets at school, social media platforms such as *Kuaishou* offer a relatively safe and personally owned space for identity exploration and presentation. Both spaces serve as a temporary escape from adult surveillance while facilitating socialisation with peers and cultivation of subcultural identities. The articulation of *luan* identity offline and post-*jingshen* culture online can be understood as a means of carving out spaces in their own terms and an attempt to symbolically resolve the contradictions between dominant ideologies and the ideologies derived from their everyday lived experiences (Malone, 2002). Also, online spaces functioned as critical extensions of students' offline social worlds, particularly during weekends and holidays when physical interaction was limited. These digital platforms enabled students to maintain continuous contact, exchange emotional support, and reinforce shared values cultivated in their peer networks. In this way, peer interactions across online and offline worlds were not separate but deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Together, they sustained recognition-based communities where students could experience care, solidarity and belonging.

Moreover, in the process of extending their collective identity beyond the physical boundaries of the school into online spaces, social media provides access to a range of cultural resources for self-presentation (McArthur, 2009). Unlike the rigid constraints imposed by the school environment where physical appearance and stylistic expressions are tightly regulated, *Kuaishou* offers students digital tools for creative identity construction. As shown in Chapter 7, *Kuaishou* provides affordances such as music, texts, and visual effects

that enable students to experiment with individualised expressions. These digital affordances provide them with opportunities to participate in defining new cultural forms rather than merely reproducing existing ones (Lange & Ito, 2009). Moreover, the platform enables them to connect with like-minded peers beyond their physical environment, extending the reach of their cultural production and reinforcing their sense of belonging.

Hebdige (1979) defines "subculture as a form of resistance in which experienced contractions and objections to this ruling ideology are obliquely represented in style" (p. 133). According to him, the communication of significant differences and group identity is an important aspect of subcultural styles. As Clarke et al. (2016) observe, subculture is not simply the appropriation of objects, but the stylisation - the active organisation of symbols, behaviours, and values into a coherent way of being that communicates group identity. In this context, there is a symbolic fit between the use of objects, expressive forms and value systems within both *luan* and post-*jingshen* culture. This subcultural style is meaningful to the participants because the objects reassembled in *luan* and *post-jingshen* culture have reflected the core concerns and values they held and communicated their desired qualities. More than aesthetic markers, these identities signal disengagement from academic life and a marginalised position within the school system. In this sense, *luan* and post-*jingshen* function synonymously: they represent students who deviate from mainstream youth styles and institutional and societal norms. Such shared values and norms developed in one space are reinforced and reproduced in the other. Essentially, their collective cultural practices are more than stylistic choices, but deliberate acts of cultural positioning that foster belonging among peers while also symbolically challenging dominant narratives of youth identity and success.

Although students' digital practices around post-*jingshen* culture largely mirrored their offline expressions associated with *luan*, there are distinct differences between them. *Luan* began as a negative label imposed by teachers and institutions to stigmatise students who deviated from academic norms. Within the school context, students later appropriated this label, using it as a shared identity marker. In contrast, *jingshen* emerged originally as an internet vernacular coined by young people themselves and is primarily circulated within digital spaces. Moreover, *luan* connotes disorder and carries disapproval, while *jingshen*, meaning spirit, energy, or vitality involves more affirmative qualities. This distinction reflects what Cohen (1980) calls the "territoriality of cultural production" - the idea that subcultures generate meaning differently across contexts. By adopting *jingshen*, students not only resisted

the derogatory framing of *luan* but also redefined their self-image in more agentic and positive terms. This shift illustrates their creative capacity and agency to rearticulate identity on their own terms, challenging dominant discourses and investing new meanings into their cultural self-presentation.

In addition, participants in the study navigated power relations not only within school but also in digital spaces, where their practices were shaped by platform governance and adult surveillance. Informal school spaces offered students some privacy yet remained subject to institutional rules and teacher supervision. Similarly, students' engagement on *Kuaishou* was monitored by teachers, parents, and platform moderation. As a result, students were constantly negotiating boundaries, using various strategies and tactics to circumvent restrictions and assert their alternative identities. However, compared to the rigid authority structure of school, where teachers exercised control during school days, the online space arguably provided greater autonomy and freedom of expression. While some teachers extended their disciplinary gaze into students' digital lives, such interventions were more fragmented and limited outside of school hours.

Importantly, students' reflections also demonstrate a continuous negotiation with their countercultural practices, particularly in how they interpreted the meaning of *jingshen*. While they attempted to reframe *jingshen* as something positive and affirmative, their understandings were still shaped by dominant evaluative frameworks. This tension highlights a dual dynamic: on the one hand, their cultural practices functioned as forms of resistance and self-definition; on the other, they remained partially constrained by the normative structures they sought to contest.

As discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, the construction of both *luan* and post-*jingshen* cultures provided participants with an alternative structure of recognition through which they could affirm and support one another. However, as previously noted, students remained entangled in negotiations with dominant power structures and adult expectations, which continued to constrain their autonomy within these collective practices. The following section discusses whether such forms of peer-based recognition can offer sufficient conditions for self-realisation.

8.3 The limits and possibilities of alternative recognition structures

As discussed in Chapter 3, the relationship between power relations and interpersonal recognition is complex and deeply embedded in everyday interactions. While students in this study sought to construct peer-based recognition structures as a means of affirming their identities and resisting marginalisation, these efforts were inevitably shaped and constrained by existing power dynamics in both offline and online contexts. It is therefore crucial to examine how the recognition they offered each other operated within these broader structures of power, and whether it provided sufficient conditions for the development of healthy self-relations. This section first offers discussion in the school context before turning to the digital space.

8.3.1 An adequate mode of recognition at school?

As demonstrated in this study, marginalised groups possess the agency to construct meaning and build communities that support positive self-understanding outside dominant recognition structures. Thomas (2012) contends that solidarity is more readily achieved within bounded subcultural groups, as members often share common social experiences and goals. However, recognition generated within these communities does not easily translate into wider societal validation. As Giles (2017) notes, individuals who develop value systems that diverge significantly from dominant cultural norms often struggle to gain recognition beyond their subcultural groups. In this study, students remained embedded within the dominant educational discourse, and their desire for recognition continued to be shaped by their ongoing subjection to the institutional valuation process (Kipnis, 2011). They did not overtly contest the legitimacy of the school system or demand broader institutional inclusion. Instead, they navigated its expectations while carving out limited spaces of recognition at the margins. Unsurprisingly, the school did not expand its normative framework to accommodate these students' values. Rather, their acts of non-conformity further entrenched their marginalisation. For many, subcultural affiliation became the primary if not the only source of positive self-understanding.

Studies have highlighted the tension between the ideal of mutual recognition and the reality of hierarchical power relations in schools, particularly between teachers and students, which often give rise to disrespectful and harmful experiences (Altmeyer, 2018; Moensted, 2022). The findings of this study show that teachers frequently exercised their authority in ways that could be abusive including violating students' physical integrity and their legal rights. Such

imbalanced relationships not only denied students voice and autonomy but also actively shaped their identities in ways that can reinforce internalised subordination As Van den Brink and Owen (2007) argue, "the identity of those who do not have the power to co-determine the terms of their legal and social status may come to involve an internalised sense of their powerlessness, inferiority and 'appropriate' place in the margins of society" (p. 2).

Moreover, the rigid temporal and spatial structures of school life (see Chapter 4) left students confined to what McLaren (1986) calls the "student state" for most of their time, offering minimal opportunities to articulate their *luan* identity. Even when students informally reclaimed school spaces for peer connection, their actions remained under surveillance and subject to institutional control. This ongoing regulation and denial of legitimacy help explain why students' narratives of schooling were dominated by negative emotional experiences and a sense of exclusion. Even when they managed to carve out informal spaces of autonomy and self-expression, these acts were largely tolerated by teachers and school authorities only because they did not fundamentally threaten the dominant order. Students' strategic compliance and moments of resistance often reflected a negotiation within, rather than a disruption of, existing power structures. This suggests that while students exercised agency, their responses were shaped and ultimately limited by the broader institutional conditions that continued to deny their legitimacy and worth.

Chapter 5 examined how repeated experiences of disrespect at school including corporal punishment, public humiliation, and systematic neglect resulted in various forms of moral injury. While such punishments may be temporally bounded, the psychological consequences of persistent institutional disregard are often enduring. Participants' accounts suggest that these moments are pivotal in shaping their self-perceptions. Honneth (1995) acknowledges that validation within subcultural groups can, to some extent, compensate for the disrespect and humiliation experienced outside the group. However, he also warns that "it is difficult to maintain self-esteem in the face of systematic denigration from outside one's subculture" (Honneth, 1995, p. xviii). This difficulty arises not only because such disrespect harms one's integrity and dignity, but more profoundly because it can also undermine the positive self-understandings individuals have previously developed through intersubjective relations (Zurn, 2015).

Taken together, while peer networks offered certain forms of recognition that supported the development of positive self-concepts, they may not be sufficient to counterbalance the long-

lasting impact of systemic marginalisation and exclusion experienced in relation to teachers and school authorities.

8.3.2 An adequate mode of recognition on *Kuaishou*?

As discussed earlier, parallels can be drawn between participants' collective practices in informal school spaces and their digital engagement on *Kuaishou*. While schools represent rigid and compulsory institutional settings, social media platforms like *Kuaishou* offer more voluntary and flexible spaces in which students can arguably exercise a greater degree of agency. This highlights the active role that young people play in shaping their everyday lives and social relations in ways that reflect their own expectations. The peer culture and supportive, affirmational communities cultivated on *Kuaishou* have provided participants with important sources of self-worth and validation.

However, I argue that these forms of recognition, though meaningful, may be considered limited or weak in their transformative potential for three main reasons. First, participants' autonomy in expressing their individuality on the platform was constrained in multiple ways. Second, participants' trust in peer recognition may be compromised by their concerns over the sincerity of online interactions. Third, the recognition achieved in digital spaces may not be transferrable into other contexts. I will discuss these limitations in the sections that follow.

Constrains on expressive autonomy

It is important to recognise the mediated nature of recognition in the context of social media (Driessens & Nærland, 2022). Media platforms are not passive conduits for expression but operate as institutional actors that actively shape the forms of self-presentation that are legitimised and valued. Platforms such as *Kuaishou*, through their algorithmic infrastructures, interface design and engagement metrics, regulate not only what content becomes visible but also the modalities through which recognition can be pursued and achieved (Campanella, 2024; Jansson, 2015). In this sense, users' acts of posting, commenting, and sharing are not entirely autonomous or neutral. Rather, algorithmic architecture privileges certain aesthetic and performative templates, narrowing the range of acceptable self-expression and predefining the conditions under which one can be seen and valued.

As discussed in Chapter 7, the algorithmic infrastructure of *Kuaishou* fosters the emergence of *imitated publics*, contributing to a homogenisation of cultural expressions. Participants'

creative outputs often resemble an assembly-line model characterised by stylistic repetition, predictable content, and limited room for variation. This production of sameness exemplifies what Campanella (2024) refers to as weak recognition: a conditional form of affirmation granted not to one's unique identity, but to the extent to which one conforms to pre-established moral and aesthetic templates. Platform logics transform recognition into a competitive process, subtly enforcing conformity to market-driven norms and behaviours. In this sense, *Kuaishou* operates as a moulding force in young people's identity performances, where users must constantly navigate the platform's implicit rules and carefully balance personal expression with algorithmic approval.

Moreover, both school and digital contexts operate through a similar logic of quantification, where acts of recognition are translated into measurable outcomes. At school, academic scores serve as the primary basis for respect or denigration in teacher-student relationships, and students must achieve high marks or significant progression to gain validation, as shown previously. In online spaces, engagement metrics such as likes and comments function similarly as indicators of performance, though even a single like or new follower can feel affirming. Just as high academic scores confer status within the school hierarchy, online engagement signals popularity among peers, highlighting a parallel logic of quantification while also revealing the lower threshold for recognition in digital spaces.

In addition to the algorithmic constraints on young people's digital expression, the construction of post-*jingshen* subculture also introduced internal norms that shaped how individuals presented themselves. These included both stylistic self-presentation and displays of intimacy. While these norms fostered a sense of belonging and collective identity, they also imposed expectations that constrained individual autonomy. Expressive freedom was often limited by the implicit requirement to conform to group-defined aesthetics and behaviours, as only those who adhered to these norms were rewarded with high engagement metrics. This dynamic contributed to the emergence of social hierarchies within the community. In this way, the subcultural space, while appearing liberatory, reproduced its own structures of conformity and exclusion. Those who deviated from post-*jingshen* styles often received less attention, or even risked marginalisation within the peer community. Recognition, then, remained conditional - contingent not only on algorithmic approval but also on alignment with group-defined boundaries of expression. Jansson (2015) aptly observes that "genuinely dialogical processes of recognition are undermined and replaced by

standardised patterns of identity-seeking" (p. 86). While the post-*jingshen* subculture enabled collective identity-making, it also circumscribed the possibilities for expressing individual difference and uniqueness.

As discussed in Chapter 7, participants were also subject to platform moderation and censorship, despite their creativity and agency in navigating these constraints. Their expressive freedom remains precarious and can be further limited as platform policies continue to evolve in accordance with the state's ideological frameworks. In some cases, platform regulations have actively censored content produced by rural or marginalised youth, as evidenced by the removal of *shehui ren* and *hanmai*-themed content (Hou, 2020; Li et al., 2020). In this study, platform governance similarly mirrored the surveillance students experienced at school, suggesting that both digital and formal institutional environments reinforce systems of social control that marginalise and discipline youth expressions.

Furthermore, participants' digital experiences were shaped by the phenomenon of context collapse, where diverse audiences - friends, strangers and potential adult viewers - are collapsed into a single, indistinct viewership (Marwick & boyd, 2010). Offline, students skilfully managed multiple social contexts, often adjusting their behaviour in the presence of authority figures. Informal spaces like school toilets provided a temporary refuge from adult surveillance. Online, however, they were required to navigate these overlapping audiences within a single interface. While some participants developed creative tactics to prevent their content from being seen by teachers or parents, the risk of exposure to unintended viewers still remained. This persistent tension can restrict their expressive freedom, especially when it comes to articulating non-mainstream identities or subcultural affiliations.

Sincerity and trust can be compromised

While participants frequently described their interactions on social media as positive and affirming, they also expressed concerns about the sincerity of the recognition they received. As shown in Chapter 7, some students noted inconsistencies between how peers engaged with them online and offline, raising questions about the authenticity and sincerity of digital affirmation. Supportive comments and engagement metrics often functioned as signals of appreciation. However, participants occasionally perceived these acts as performative or strategically motivated, thereby reducing their emotional investment and sense of trust in digital relationships.

Giles (2017) stresses that sincerity is central to the struggle for recognition: individuals must believe that the affirmation they receive is genuine in order for it to hold meaning. When recognition is perceived as insincere or transactional, its value can be significantly reduced. This is particularly relevant in the context of social media, where recognition is often mediated through visible metrics. As Pooley (2010) argue, digital platforms tend to foster performative interaction, where affirmation is frequently shaped by self-interest, social reciprocity and participation in social norms.

Although digital technologies have the potential to extend the intimate sphere and create *intimate publics* in which care and validation can be exchanged among strangers (Hansson et al., 2024), such potentials were rarely realised by participants in this study. Recognition from unfamiliar others was often experienced as weaker or less meaningful. Participants generally placed greater trust in affirmation from peers they knew offline, particularly close friends in their subcultural group. Support from acquaintances or anonymous users was often less trusted, which suggests that while social media expanded their social networks, emotionally significant recognition remained anchored in offline relationships.

This trust was not solely a product of familiarity, but often rooted in the shared experiences and status in their offline environment, particularly the school. The emotional intimacy and solidarity cultivated in the offline settings created the foundation for more trusted online interactions. Again, it indicates that the digital and physical were not separate but mutually constitutive: online displays of closeness helped sustain, deepen, and publicly affirm the offline relationships that the participants valued. Although some digital expressions of intimacy were viewed as less sincere, peer relationships within close circles of friends still offered one of the few reliable sources of recognition amid the broader landscape of institutional exclusion.

Not transferrable across contexts

While the mediated forms of recognition gained through platforms like *Kuaishou* may serve to temporarily compensate for participants' experiences of disrespect in offline settings such as school, this recognition remains largely confined to peer interactions and is not easily transferable across social fields. Giles (2017), expanding on Honneth's recognition theory, differentiates between *affirmational* and *transformational* struggles for recognition. Affirmational struggles are ongoing efforts to affirm one's identity claims and gain belonging

within existing structures. In contrast, transformational struggles aim to challenge and restructure the very norms and power relations that shape recognition, often emerging in response to moral injury or systemic injustice.

From this perspective, the peer cultures constructed by participants in this study can be understood as *affirmational*, rather than *transformational* struggles. While they built emotionally supportive networks and validated each other, these actions did not challenge the institutional structures that originally denied them recognition. Instead, the counter-cultural identities they constructed, both in school and on *Kuaishou*, functioned more as coping mechanisms than as vehicles for structural change. Their symbolic withdrawal from adult-dominated spaces, whether through retreating into informal school space or engaging online, signals a form of escape rather than direct confrontation.

Similar to their offline subcultural behaviours, participants' struggles for recognition in the digital space rarely aimed at gaining validation from institutional authorities. As McBride (2013) suggests, the struggle for recognition is ultimately a struggle for authority, yet students in the study remained structurally disempowered and lacked the means to influence institutional perceptions or policies. This disempowerment is reflected in how their post-*jingshen* identity on *Kuaishou* was frequently read through dominant discourses that stigmatise rural youth as undisciplined, academically disengaged, and overly absorbed in digital entertainment. As discussed in Chapter 7, teachers' dismissive or critical remarks about students' online activities illustrate how their digital self-expression served to reinforce, rather than challenge, the negative stereotypes that adults perpetuate about young people.

Zittoun (2004) notes that "a young person who has been defined in exclusively negative terms at school… may wish to be judged by others on something other than school-related skills" (p. 154). As discussed in Chapter 5, the school's evaluative system continues to privilege academic achievement while systematically devaluing non-academic forms of knowledge and competence. This narrow evaluative framework not only shapes students' experiences within school but also extends into how their digital activities are interpreted. Platforms like *Kuaishou* offer alternative spaces for students to gain validation through attributes such as physical appearance, creativity and digital literacy. As Papacharissi (2010) points out, competencies in online content production, trend adaptation and audience engagement require strategic awareness and reflexivity. However, these forms of knowledge

and skills remain largely unrecognised in formal contexts, often dismissed as distractions or evidence of academic failure.

In this way, young people's digital achievements are not only undervalued but also pathologised by teachers and other adult authorities, indicating both non-recognition and malrecognition, as discussed previously. Such devaluation reinforces institutional hierarchies of value systems, denying marginalised youth the chance to redefine what is considered valuable within their lived realities. As Hebdige (1988) argues, subcultures can be read as expressions of powerlessness and a celebration of impotence. Therefore, while participants' subcultural expressions offer temporary forms of empowerment, they remain constrained by the broader structures of recognition.

In addition, the existing cultural hierarchy in China also tends to delegitimise rural and working-class expressions, framing them as culturally inferior (see Chapter 2). As a platform closely associated with rural users, *Kuaishou* is often positioned by urban mainstream media as representative of "low culture" (Liu, 2020). Within this hierarchy, the cultural production of marginalised youth - no matter how creative or expressive - tends to be frequently interpreted through frames of moral and aesthetic vulgarity. This not only limits how their identities are perceived by non-rural population but also diminishes the value of their cultural contributions in broader public, dominant discourse. As a result, the recognition students gained through their participation in post-*jingshen* subculture on *Kuaishou* is largely non-transferable beyond localised, peer-based contexts. Their achievements online, while meaningful within their immediate communities, do not easily translate into mainstream cultural settings. This lack of broader legitimacy reflects the ongoing exclusion of rural youth from dominant narratives of creativity and modernity.

Despite these constraints, participants actively engaged in ongoing and complex identity work, using digital spaces to seek connection, validation and status. What social media offers is an alternative to adult-dominated public spaces. Young people's core practices in the networked publics reflect a continuation of offline practice and meanwhile the properties and dynamics of the new technology have shaped the process and the ways in which young people interact with their social world (boyd, 2008). In this context, media technologies are not deterministic for cultural practices but should be understood as "embodiments of social and cultural relationships that in turn shape and structure our possibilities for social action and cultural expression" (Ito et al., 2009, p. 4). The appeal of social media, then, lies not in

the technology itself, but in the opportunities it affords for young people to present themselves, articulate their identities, and receive support from peers. As Giles (2017) reminds us, "what is at stake in struggles for recognition is not only overcoming oppression and injustice but also using one's power to create meaning and value for oneself" (p. 201). Even if the recognition young people achieved through digital practices is sometimes seen as weak or limited, it nonetheless enables important moments of mutual affirmation and identity validation.

Although platform dynamics often constrain user autonomy through algorithmic manipulation and moderation policies that affect content visibility and expression, young people still managed to cultivate peer-based forms of mutual respect. These practices should not be dismissed as meaningless. Rather, they illustrate the creative agency of marginalised youth and their capacity to form communities that sustain moral autonomy and offer a sense of belonging outside dominant recognition structures. As Pedersen (2022) notes, mediated communication in a way facilitates and co-constitutes the increased need of individuals for intersubjective recognition from peer groups in order to confirm their values outside the unified standards of traditional institutions. In this sense, social media opens new avenues for autonomy and recognition that are less confined by the disciplinary logics of the school. Through their everyday digital practices, these young people have developed a recognisable collective identity signified by visual and textual markers which distinguishes their subcultural community and aligns with their lived realities. While these practices do introduce new restrictions, they also provide a counter-space for meaning-making and identity affirmation. As Giles (2017) and Rogers (2009) suggest, marginalised groups could cultivate positive self-relations within subcultures without relying on the dominant group's approval. Therefore, it can be argued that despite receiving limited recognition from authority figures, or broader society, the culture and value system this group of young people has co-constructed through these practices allows them to feel seen, validated, and connected.

To sum up, the recognition achieved within subcultural peer groups, both online and offline, though limited in many ways, is nonetheless empowering. It may not overturn their marginalised social position, but it affirms their shared experiences, cultural values, and individuality. In seeking and finding others like themselves, both online and offline, these young people construct a sense of belonging and develop a more positive understanding of themselves. Even when recognition is confined to subcultural boundaries, it still functions as

a form of meaningful validation - an affirmation of their ways of living and being in the world.

8.4 Chapter summary

In summary, this chapter provided an in-depth discussion of the study's key findings. It first connects the experience of disrespect students felt at school with the broader social and economic order and then discusses different forms and categorisations of disrespect. The chapter then explored how students' countercultural identities - manifested as *luan* at school and post-*jingshen* on *Kuaishou* - are deeply interconnected. The post-*jingshen* culture is framed as a digital extension of *luan*, highlighting how young people navigate and negotiate their identities across institutional and digital spaces. Finally, the chapter critically examines whether the forms of peer-based recognition constructed in these contexts are sufficient for self-realisation. While both school and social media offer opportunities for peer validation, they remain limited in their transformative potential due to persistent structural constraints. Nonetheless, students' construction of subcultural communities, both online and offline, serves as a meaningful avenue for mutual recognition, support and solidarity that can foster positive self-concepts. The next chapter will summarise the study's key findings and contributions.

Chapter 9 Conclusion

Chapter overview

This final chapter summarises the key findings and contributions of the study. It begins by revisiting the three research questions that underpinned this study and synthesising the main findings and discussions. This is followed by the study's contributions to knowledge, policy and practice. The chapter then offers reflections on the research process and suggests directions for future research. It concludes with a personal reflection on my research journey, both as an individual and as a researcher.

9.1 Answering the research questions

9.1.1 Research question 1

The first research question asks: *What are the schooling experiences of academically low-achieving students?* Chapter 5 addressed this question by focusing on students' perceived relationships with teachers, illustrating how these interactions reflect the dominant recognition structure within the school and significantly impact students' emotional well-being and self-concept.

Drawing on Honneth's theory of recognition - which identifies three modes of recognition: love, rights, and solidarity - to analyse the research data, I identified three corresponding forms of disrespect experienced by participants when recognition was withdrawn from their interpersonal relationships with meaningful others, in this case, teachers. As outlined in Table 5 in Chapter 5 (p. 98), these forms of disrespect are: (1) lack of care and instances of abuse, (2) unequal treatment, and (3) feelings of being undervalued.

The findings show that students commonly described a lack of care and positive attention from teachers, and often reported feeling invisible in the school space and being mistreated not just psychologically but also in physical ways. Honneth (in Honneth & Margalit, 2001) conceptualises experiences of social invisibility as a morally significant form of disregard. In the boarding school context, where teachers play a vital role in providing emotional support and affirmation, their indifferent attitudes towards students were particularly damaging. It can undermine students' self-confidence, which, according to Honneth, develops from receiving love as a foundational form of recognition. In addition, many students reported experiencing corporal punishment for failing to meet behavioural or academic expectations. Though

legitimised by the school as a disciplinary measure, these practices inflicted physical pain and public humiliation. Moreover, such treatment was not merely disciplinary; it constitutes a form of systematic disrespect as well as a violation of physical integrity.

The second form of disrespect experienced by participants concerns unequal treatment. Students reported consistent patterns of unequal treatment in comparison to their higher-achieving peers. First, they were often given limited access to educational resources and rewards, and their legal right to bodily integrity was often disregarded as corporal punishment was disproportionately imposed on them, reinforcing their inferior status. This unequal treatment contributed to feelings of exclusion from the school community as rightful participants. Second, spatial segregation further reinforced their marginalisation, with students placed at the back of classrooms based on academic performance. This visible, physical separation created a symbolic distinction and hierarchy and restricted their access to shared learning spaces. Third, students were at times denied basic entitlements, including the right to education, medical treatment, and privacy, constituting violations of rights all students should be entitled to.

The third form of disrespect relates to the devaluation of students' non-academic traits, skills, and ways of being. First, students perceived that teachers had low expectations of them and distrusted their academic abilities, which signalled that they were not seen as capable learners. This lack of belief in their potential contributed to feelings of worthlessness and demotivation. Second, many students felt stigmatised by negative labels and derogatory terms used by teachers, suggesting they were perceived as problematic or even harmful to the school community. Third, students' non-academic skills were largely ignored or dismissed by teachers as irrelevant or unworthy of development. This devaluation not only diminished students' self-esteem but also limited their opportunities to construct meaningful identities beyond academic achievement.

In this way, participants' schooling experiences were shaped by multiple layers of interpersonal disrespect, clearly affecting their self-conception and identity. These three forms of disrespect undermined students' self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. The absence of recognition in their interactions with teachers, and sometimes with high-achieving peers, often fostered negative self-conceptions. Such interactions also generated moral and emotional suffering, expressed through shame, frustration and resentment. Importantly, these emotional responses not only signalled the withdrawal of recognition essential for healthy

self-development, but also motivated students to seek alternative sources of recognition and to assert their value through other means.

9.1.2 Research question 2

The second research question asks: *How do these students navigate academic failure and their marginal status within the school system?* In the research analysis presented in Chapter 6, I address this question by examining a new form of recognition that students constructed within their peer groups. The findings show that students developed an alternative, counter-cultural identity known as *luan*, which diverged from the dominant school culture and provided an alternative evaluative framework. Within this peer-based recognition system, students affirmed and supported one another, creating opportunities for care, validation and identity affirmation in ways largely unavailable through intersubjective relationships with teachers.

Three key characteristics of *luan* culture have been identified: (1) a distinctive style of appearance, (2) "doing nothing" culture in the classroom, and (3) "doing something" culture outside the classroom. First, students expressed themselves through distinctive stylistic choices that diverged from institutional norms. These visual markers were redefined as symbols of being "cool" and played a significant role in fostering a sense of group identity and visible commitment to the peer culture. Second, in the classroom, students resisted the institutional logic of time as something to be used productively. Instead, they reclaimed class time for themselves, expressing agency through academic disengagement. However, their experiences of boredom also reflect a sense of powerlessness in the classroom setting. Third, outside of class, they developed a "doing something" culture that involves rule-breaking and disruptive behaviours such as group activities and romantic relationships, which helped foster strong social bonds and a sense of belonging.

The construction of this *luan* culture represents more than just resistance to school norms; it is an active attempt to build a recognition structure rooted in shared experiences of marginalisation. The label *luan* itself became a framework through which students interpreted their social positioning, enabling them to establish alternative codes of value, foster solidarity, and esteem each other on the basis of these new norms. Yet, this new recognition order was not without its own forms of inequality. The group's specific norms and expectations created internal hierarchies and excluded those who did not fully participate in the shared practices.

The students' pursuit of recognition also unfolded in tension with institutional power. Their cultural identity was often negatively orientated towards the school's values and expectations, placing them in a complex relationship with teachers and school authorities. The findings show that students adopted two primary strategies in response to disciplinary power: strategic conformity and silent conformity. The former involved navigating the spatial organisation of school life to avoid surveillance and punishment, while the latter referred to passive adherence to school rules without active engagement. Both strategies reflect students' efforts to manage the risks of visible transgression and mitigate the consequences of punishment and disrespect.

In short, participants responded to experiences of disrespect in school by seeking alternative spaces of recognition in which to cultivate a sense of self-realisation. Meanwhile, the forms of conformity they adopted reveal the nuanced ways in which students negotiated their position within a school environment shaped by asymmetrical power relations. While their struggles for recognition suggest an implicit critique of the dominant discourse of schooling, their responses remained largely constrained within the boundaries of existing structures of power. Ultimately, their actions did not represent absolute acceptance nor radical opposition, but an ongoing process of self-positioning within an environment that both marginalised and defined them.

9.1.3 Research question 3

The third research question asks: *what role does social media play in students' everyday lives, particularly in relation to identity and cultural expression?* The findings show that this group of young people used the short video platform *Kuaishou* as an alternative space to construct countercultural identities and sustain peer networks. Through the lens of recognition theory, three key mechanisms of mediated recognition were identified, through which participants sought validation, belonging and self-affirmation.

First, participants developed a recognisable self-presentation that departs from mainstream or adult-defined norms, which I define as post-*jingshen* culture. Such cultural identity was produced, circulated and validated on *Kuaishou* through two interrelated mechanisms: *imitated* and *networked publics*. By adopting and reappropriating cultural materials and platform-specific trends, participants created highly visible and easily replicable expressions of identity. These were facilitated through the technological affordances of imitated publics and reinforced through peer interactions within networked publics. The interplay of these two

publics enabled young people to foster group solidarity and develop a shared sense of self-worth.

Second, participants expressed emotional attachment and interpersonal closeness through what I term intimate publics - digitally mediated communities grounded in emotional expression and reciprocity. On *Kuaishou*, affectionate comments, emotionally supportive interactions and the display of "intimacy scores" served as visible markers of care and relationship maintenance. Their public performances of intimacy extended personal ties into broader social relationships, allowing participants to be recognised not only as emotionally significant individuals but also as valued members of a supportive community. In this way, intimate publics created space for alternative forms of recognition rooted in relational reciprocity and visibly emotional connection.

Third, participants frequently engaged in strategic behaviours to maximise their engagement metrics. These metrics functioned as symbolic currencies of social acceptance and affirmation, making recognition on *Kuaishou* a datafied and measurable experience. Structural affordances transformed abstract notions of approval and self-worth into quantifiable and comparable indicators. Through participation in cycles of content production, feedback reception, and adaptive strategy, young people experienced a continuous form of self-affirmation shaped both by social interactions and the platform's infrastructural logic. This logic of datafied popularity has shaped how recognition is operated within algorithmically governed socio-technical systems.

Taken together, I have theorised digitally mediated recognition as expressed through three interrelated dynamics of networked, imitated, and intimate publics, alongside the logic of datafied popularity. Among them, networked publics enabled connectivity and circulation; imitated publics encouraged the replication of platform-specific and culturally normative expressions; and intimate publics fostered emotionally charged, relational interactions. Collectively, these publics contributed to the production of algorithmically favoured content and the accumulation of engagement metrics. These publics also co-constructed a digital environment in which recognition was pursued through the entanglement of individual agency, peer culture, and platform logics. Through their shared digital practices, participants collectively created alternative structures of recognition, affirming their identities, self-worth, and social belonging within algorithmically mediated spaces.

Drawing on the research findings, this thesis offers an in-depth discussion of how recognition and disrespect shape participants' experiences across school and digital contexts. It does so by exploring the nature of disrespect in school, linking it to broader social and economic hierarchies that mediate recognition. It also argues that different forms of disrespect are interconnected, collectively contributing to students' feelings of exclusion and a sense of meaningless presence in school. Their struggles for recognition can be understood as a pursuit of a "meaningful sense of presence".

The study also foregrounds the interconnection between participants' countercultural identities developed in school and on social media. The post-*jingshen* identity formed on *Kuaishou* is interpreted as a digital extension of their offline *luan* identity. While school environments are often rigid and hierarchical, digital platforms offer comparatively more flexible yet still constrained spaces for self-expression and the formation of subcultural communities.

Finally, the study offers a critical appraisal of whether these alternative cultural identities provide sufficient recognition for self-realisation. Recognition in schools remains limited by institutional power dynamics and the lasting impact of moral injuries caused by disrespect. Meanwhile, recognition online is shaped by platform infrastructure and algorithms, institutional power structures and peer-based norms. Participants' expressive autonomy is often constrained by these dynamics, and their trust in peer recognition may be weakened by concerns over the sincerity of online interactions. Moreover, the recognition gained in digital spaces is not easily transferable to other contexts, as students' digital skills and (sub)cultural expressions are often devalued or pathologised within the school discourse and the broader socio-political landscape of cultural production in China.

Overall, the discussion highlights how young people's struggles for recognition are shaped and often constrained by overlapping institutional and digital power structures. Yet, despite these limitations, participants played an active role in carving out alternative spaces on their own terms. The subcultural communities they formed across school and online contexts offered meaningful spaces for mutual support, solidarity and self-worth. While not transformative in a structural sense, these spaces enabled participants to affirm their individuality and develop more positive understandings of themselves as subjects worthy of being seen, valued and recognised.

9.2 Key contribution

9.2.1 Contribution to knowledge

This study offers an original contribution to knowledge by centring the lived experiences of a group of low-achieving and marginalised students in rural China - a group that remains largely underexplored in existing educational and youth studies literature. Rather than adopting a structural or deficit-based perspective to explain academic underachievement, this research foregrounds the relational aspects of students' everyday school lives. It examines how students themselves make sense of their marginal status and enact agency in a context where they are routinely positioned as less competent or valuable. In doing so, it offers a nuanced understanding of marginalised rural youth not as passive recipients of structural disadvantage but as active meaning-makers negotiating complex institutional and social dynamics. The findings on countercultural identity formation at school offer novel insights into student resistance and informal youth culture in rural China.

This study also contributes to the growing field of digital youth studies by exploring how young people engage with social media as a site for identity presentation, cultural production and community building. It extends understanding of rural youth's digital practices by examining not just what they do online, but how and why these practices matter to them. Through this lens, the study examines how young people creatively navigate the affordances and constraints of digital platforms to construct in-group norms and subcultural communities online. In doing so, it contributes empirical insights to debates on digital culture and youth subjectivity in an increasingly digitalised society.

At the time of writing, this study was one of the first in the rural Chinese context to examine the interplay between school and digital life - two domains central to students' everyday experience. It contributes to the literature on the continuity and entanglement between online and offline practices by showing how students' digital practices are deeply embedded in and shaped by their schooling experiences. This analytical linkage was made possible through a methodological approach that integrated both online and offline ethnographic data, allowing for a comprehensive examination of youth identity, cultural expression and peer relationships across physical and digital contexts.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the application and development of recognition theory in the field of education, particularly in the under-researched context of rural China. At the

time of writing, this study represents, to my knowledge, the first application of Honneth's theory of recognition as a conceptual and analytical framework for examining students' experiences of marginalisation, (non-)conformity, and cultural production in a rural Chinese school. It sheds light on how students' interpersonal relationships with teachers and peers influence their self-relations. While some existing studies have noted that the unequal treatment received by students and the negative relationships between teachers and students at school are often linked to student disengagement and (hidden) dropout (see Chapter 2), this study offers a new explanatory lens. Through the concept of disrespect, it shows how the students' disrespectful experiences in school interactions may cause emotional suffering and a diminished sense of self-worth, which in turn can contribute to students' disengagement and detachment from the school community.

This study also extends the concept of disrespect by contextualising three forms of disrespect experienced by students in their everyday school lives. In response to these experiences, students developed a peer-based recognition structure that served as a counterbalance to the lack of affirmation from school authorities. By reinterpreting recognition theory within the specific cultural and institutional context of rural Chinese education, this research contributes new insights to the broader literature on youth identity, resistance, and agency. It demonstrates how students construct alternative evaluative frameworks and supportive peer cultures when formal structures of recognition fail to acknowledge their value and individuality.

Furthermore, this study expands the scope of recognition theory by applying it to the digital context, specifically focusing on students' online practices. It contributes to the limited literature on recognition theory in digital spaces by theorising mediated recognition through the formation of three interconnected types of publics, all grounded in the mechanisms of datafied recognition. This theoretical extension bridges recognition theory with digital youth studies, providing a nuanced framework to understand how young people navigate visibility, connection and affirmation within online environments consistently shaped by algorithmic logics and platform norms.

Additionally, this study contributes to the discussion of power within intersubjective recognition theory by demonstrating how recognition processes are shaped and constrained by institutional power structures across school and digital contexts. This highlights the need

to account for power dynamics when examining how individuals and groups seek, negotiate, or are denied recognition.

Methodologically, the study contributes to qualitative research with children and young people by offering a reflexive account of conducting ethnography in a rural school where the researcher also occupied a temporary teaching role. It advances understanding of researcher positionality, particularly in navigating multiple roles and addressing the ethical and relational complexities of working with young people. Furthermore, the study demonstrates how emotional work during fieldwork can act as a methodological tool to understand relational concepts such as recognition in this study. It suggests that understanding relational concepts can be accessed not only through participants' accounts, but also through the researcher's own embodied and affective engagement in the field.

In summary, this study makes contributions to empirical, theoretical and methodological knowledge across multiple fields, including education, youth studies, digital sociology and qualitative research.

9.2.2 Contribution to policy and practice

This study offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of academically marginalised rural students in China, highlighting areas where education policy could better promote equity and inclusion. Although current education law states that no school may establish "key" and "non-key" classes, this study shows that more subtle forms of ability tracking (such as differentiated seating arrangements) persist in schools. More explicit and enforceable policies are required to ensure equitable treatment of students and to prevent grouping based on academic attainment.

Policy frameworks could also be expanded to include evaluation indicators beyond test scores, incorporating measures of inclusiveness, student well-being and engagement. Such changes would encourage schools to create more inclusive environments that prioritise student well-being and foster a sense of belonging, rather than treating them primarily as subjects of discipline or evaluation.

For school leaders and teachers, this research underscores the need to challenge dominant perspectives that frame academically low-performing students primarily in terms of failure, trouble, or lack of potential. Participants' narratives have shown a strong desire to be heard,

understood and treated with respect. Many described the interviews as rare moments of being listened to without judgement, something they felt was largely absent from daily school life.

Schools can respond by creating environments where students are recognised as full and unique individuals with their own thoughts, feelings and abilities. Opportunities for open, less hierarchical dialogue between students and adults, together with diverse extracurricular and non-academic activities, such as sports, arts, music, digital media, and community-based projects, can offer these students more avenues to experience affirmation and achievement. In this way, they can be valued for what they are and what they can do, rather than diminished for what they are not or cannot achieve.

Teachers play a particularly influential role in shaping students' self-perception and school experiences, as evidenced in this study. The findings highlight the importance of treating all students with respect, regardless of their academic performance, and of avoiding practices such as corporal punishment, unfair treatment or negative labelling. Small, everyday interactions, such as acknowledging progress, offering praise or simply showing care and attention, can significantly strengthen students' confidence, motivation and sense of belonging. Teachers are therefore advised to offer more inclusive practices as well as practices of affirmation in their daily interactions with students so that every student feels seen, valued and supported in the classroom.

The findings also suggest the need for a more nuanced understanding of young people's digital engagement. Often viewed through a deficit lens, online platforms are, for many participants, spaces for identity formation, cultural participation and social recognition. Rather than banning or dismissing these practices, teachers can support students by fostering critical discussions about their digital lives, integrating digital literacy and creative media production into classroom activities, and recognising students' digital contributions as legitimate forms of skill and expression.

9.3 Reflections and future research

This study was shaped by several methodological boundaries and contextual conditions that influenced what could be observed, documented and analysed. These reflections are not presented as flaws, but as situated aspects of conducting ethnographic research in a complex field.

First, observation of peer interactions within the school setting was necessarily constrained by both ethical and practical considerations. For instance, some private or sensitive peer dynamics were not always accessible or appropriate to observe directly. Moreover, the timing of fieldwork which took place during the second term of the academic year influenced the types of events and interactions captured (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Some occasions in school life, such as the annual sports day often cited by participants as a highly valued event, fell outside the period of observation.

The relatively short duration of the fieldwork was shaped by both project timelines and my prior familiarity with the field. While the research did not aim to trace students' experiences longitudinally, the timeframe nonetheless allowed for in-depth engagement with participants. A longer-term study would have required a different research design and focus. Despite these temporal limitations, the study has offered meaningful insights into how students navigated everyday school life and digital practices during a particular stage of their schooling.

Moreover, access to students' digital lives was necessarily partial, given the nature of digital communication and ethical concerns. While I documented publicly shared content by participants and drew on interviews to understand students' digital practices, several aspects, such as deleted posts, private messages, or the behind-the-scenes processes of content creation, remained outside the scope of observation. Nevertheless, interview data served as an important complement, allowing me to access the students' perspectives and gain contextual insights that were not always accessible through observation alone.

As noted in Chapter 1, "rural China" is not a monolithic category, and rural students themselves live in diverse social, cultural and economic contexts. This small-scale qualitative study focuses on a specific group of academically marginalised but digitally active students at one single school in southwest China. The aim is not to generalise findings to all rural youth across the country, but to offer a nuanced, in-depth account of the lived experiences of this underrepresented group. While this research provides rich insight into how digital practices can intersect with academic marginalisation, this does not imply that all disengaged students are, or must be, digitally engaged. However, the alternative spaces these students carved out for themselves through digital platforms may offer meaningful points of reference or reflection for understanding how young people navigate marginalisation, whether or not they express themselves through digital media.

There are several potential directions for future research in the areas of education, youth identity and digital culture. First, while this study offers a rich and situated understanding of a specific group in one school, I recommend further qualitative research across a wider range of rural contexts and schools. It can therefore expand the scholarship surrounding rural students' schooling and digital lives, helping to uncover institutional and regional similarities and differences, and offer a more comprehensive picture of rural youth in contemporary China.

Second, this study demonstrates the value of applying recognition theory as a theoretical and analytical tool in understanding educational and digital engagement among marginalised students. The findings highlight the theory's potential to illuminate the complex social dynamics that shape young people's experiences. Future research can build on this application by refining, extending, or adapting the framework to examine diverse cultural and institutional contexts.

A third direction involves conducting longitudinal studies to capture changes in students' experiences over time, particularly across key educational transitions as well as school-to-work transitions. Although a substantial body of research has examined school-to-work transitions in Western contexts, including the UK, there remains limited research on Chinese rural students' transitions, especially for those who do not attend academic high schools or universities. One year after the fieldwork, one participant, now employed in a metropolitan factory, shared his pride in earning a higher salary than peers who remained in their hometown. His narrative illustrates how transitions from school to work, and from rural to urban environments, can introduce new evaluative frameworks, reshape peer networks, and influence how recognition is pursued. Future research could explore how young people continue to navigate identity and recognition within these transitions.

Another area worth further exploration is the relationship between youth and space/place. Space was not the primary analytical lens of this study, yet the findings suggest that students' social practices are deeply shaped by both their physical and digital environments. For instance, certain spaces outside school, such as nearby local shops, function similarly to school toilets, serving as informal places where students socialise and express alternative identities. Given that places afford particular ways of enacting social relationships and thus open possibilities for developing culture and subjectivity (Farrugia & Wood, 2017), further

research with a focused lens on space/place can contribute to the existing body of literature on how spatial contexts shape youth practices, (sub)cultures, and identity formations.

Finally, there is a need for further research on gender identities and expressions among rural students and youth in China. As discussed in section 2.2.2, students' gender performances have been widely examined in Western contexts, yet the notion of masculinity in China can carry meanings distinct from those in the West. To date, there has been very limited scholarship on young people's gender performances within school and rural contexts in China. This study has observed gendered performances in the school setting and online, which reflects the ongoing influence of traditional gender norms. However, these performances were more nuanced than a simple binary of gender expression. For example, while many students expressed conventional forms of masculinity and femininity, there were also instances of girls adopting behaviours typically associated with masculinity. Findings on gendered performances are not highlighted in this thesis, as they fall outside its scope. Future research could examine how rural youth negotiate, resist, conform to, or rework gender norms in their everyday lives, across both physical and digital spaces.

9.4 Some final words

Conducting this research has been deeply meaningful, not only in terms of my professional development as a researcher but also as a personal journey. As I reflected in the positionality section of Chapter 1, this project has continuously pushed me to re-examine my relationships with others, with the world around me, and with the meritocratic system that shapes so many of our lives, including myself.

While I was not one of the students in the study who faced marginalisation within the school system - in fact, I was someone who received significant recognition from it - engaging with their stories challenged me to (re)consider my own position. I may not have directly related to their experiences of being disrespected in school, but I have known what it feels like to be disrespected in other ways, particularly as an Asian woman studying and living in a white-dominated and patriarchal society. I am not suggesting that my experiences are equivalent to those of the students in the study. But the emotional impact - the hurt, the sense of not being seen or valued - resonated with me on a personal level. This research has made me reflect on the importance of recognition - how vital it is to be seen and valued as an individual. As

Taylor (1994) notes, "due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need" (p. 26), and my findings confirm that this need remains as significant today as ever.

One especially meaningful moment occurred during my visit to Griffith University's Gold Coast campus in Australia. After my presentation, the only Chinese attendee approached me and shared that he had travelled from Brisbane just to hear the talk. He told me that he had once been one of the students I was studying, and that the presentation had deeply resonated with him. He thanked me for doing the research, saying he was grateful that someone had finally seen them. He asked me to send him my articles once they are published. We did not have time for a longer conversation, but his words have stayed with me. That moment was the most powerful affirmation of this study's value. For me, it was one of the most rewarding parts of the entire research process.

To conclude this thesis, I would like to share two short poems that I wrote during a creative writing workshop. We were asked to write different forms of poetry that captured the essence of our research. Here, I present two pieces - one a *nonet* and the other a *diamond poem*. I hope they capture something of the spirit, the struggle, and the humanity of the young people whose stories are at the heart of this work.

They have lost their sense of being in school

Labelled, dismissed as the "bad" students

Wandering between hope and none

The future unclear, distant

Still they fight to be seen

In ways of their own

They deserve more

Dignity

Voice

Students

Unseen in school

Coping and connecting

Online space as their way out

Expression and community

They struggle to find

Recognition

Appendices

Appendix 1: Participant information sheet

Note: This is the English version of the participant information sheet submitted with the ethics application. A Chinese translation was provided to participants.

Project title: Teenagers' use of social media in relation to their school experiences
Researcher(s): Yuanya Zhang
Department: School of Education
Contact details: yuanya.zhang@durham.ac.uk
Supervisor names: Dr Anna Llewellyn; Dr Cristina Costa
Supervisor contact details: a.e.llewellyn@durham.ac.uk; cristina.costa@durham.ac.uk
Date completed: 17/02/2023

You are invited to take part in a study that I am conducting as part of my PhD at Durham University. This study has received ethical approval from Education Research Ethics Committee of Durham University. Before you decide whether to agree to take part it is important for you to understand the purpose of the research and what is involved as a participant. Please read the following information carefully. Please get in contact if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?
The aim of this study is to understand teenagers' use of social media in relation to their school experiences in rural China. The study focuses on rural students' online content production and their identity performance. This research is funded by NINE DTP (ESRC Funding, grant number: ES/P000762/1) and is expected to be completed by April 2025.

Why have I been invited to take part?
You have been invited because you are a middle school student in rural China and you are an active user of social media platforms.

What will happen to me if I take part?
If you agree to take part in the study, you will be asked to do interviews at school and other public space during weekends. You may also be asked to write down your answers if you prefer to do so. Multiple interviews are expected to take place during the study and each interview will normally last for 30 minutes to one hour. Online interviews may also take place after the researcher leaves school via Microsoft Teams, and Microsoft Teams can be downloaded here: https://www.microsoft.com/en-gb/microsoft-teams/group-chat-software. All interviews will be video/audio recorded. All questions are optional, and therefore you may skip any questions that you would prefer not to answer.

Apart from interviews and/or your written texts if you choose to do so, the researcher will also observe your daily activities at school and other social space and write fieldnotes based on her observation. The researcher will also follow your social media accounts upon receiving permission from you and collect data of your online practices including screenshots of your personal profiles and online posts, videos and photos you've shared online and other interactive practices you've engaged such as comments you received.

Are there any potential risks involved?

Whilst we do not anticipate any risks in this project, we are aware that discussing some aspects of personal (negative) experiences may be a sensitive topic for some students. As a result, please be aware that all questions are optional for you. Furthermore, if we are informed of any information that may represent a safeguarding issue, we have a responsibility to pass this information on to the school authorities or your parents/legal guardians.

Are there any benefits of taking part?
By engaging in this study, you will have the opportunity to learn about your relationship with social media and digital technologies and reflect on your personal experiences. The findings of the study will also be used to inform educators and parents of how to better support teenagers. At the end of the study, you will receive small gifts (e.g., snacks/cups) for your time, and as a thank you for taking part in the study.

What will happen to my data?
Once data analysis has been completed, all identifiable personal data (such as the school name, your names and social media account name) will be removed to ensure that your identity cannot be traced or recognised in research publications. Pseudonyms will be applied to protect your privacy. Any online traceable data will be avoided in presentations and publications, e.g., direct quotes from your online posts. If the researcher decides to use any online visual images on your social media for illustration in her presentations or publications, separate consent will be sought and all visual images will be pixelated to conceal your identity and protect your privacy (e.g., people's faces will be pixelated).

All data will be stored on Durham University's server and automatically backed up in accordance with GDPR and institutional guidelines and processes. For more information about GDPR and how Durham University treats your data, please see: https://www.dur.ac.uk/ig/dp/. An additional copy of the data will be stored in the researcher's personal laptop and will be encrypted.

Please be aware that if you disclose information which indicates the potential for serious and immediate harm to yourself or others, the research team may be obliged to breach confidentiality and report this to relevant authorities. Where you disclose behaviour (by yourself or others) that is potentially illegal but does not present serious and immediate danger to others, the researcher will, where appropriate, signpost you to relevant services, but the information you provide will be kept confidential (unless you explicitly request otherwise).

You can find information about the University's responsibilities for data protection and your rights under data protection legislation in the University's privacy notice.

Can I choose not to take part? What happens if I change my mind and want to withdraw from the study?
Yes. Your participation is voluntary and you do not have to agree to take part. If you do agree to take part, you can withdraw without giving a reason. You will be able to withdraw your data at any time until data collection has been completed by the end of October 2023. All your personal data will be destroyed if you ask to withdraw before this time. If you have any concerns about such use of your data, please contact the researcher to discuss.

What will happen to the results of the project?

Expected outputs of this research consists of PhD thesis, journal publications, and presentations at conferences. The research findings may also be communicated to the public through websites or other sources.

Durham University is committed to sharing the results of its world-class research for public benefit. As part of this commitment the University has established an online repository for all Durham University Higher Degree theses which provides access to the full text of freely available theses. The study in which you are invited to participate will be written up as a thesis. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives, to facilitate its use in future research. The thesis will be published open access.

Who do I contact if I have any questions or concerns about this study?
If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please speak to the researcher or their supervisor. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please submit a complaint via research.policy@durham.ac.uk.

Thank you for reading this information and considering taking part in this study.

Appendix 2: Consent form

Note: This is the English version of the consent form submitted with the ethics application. A Chinese translation was provided to participants.

Project title: Teenagers' use of social media in relation to their school experiences

Researcher(s): Yuanya Zhang
Department: School of Education
Contact details: yuanya.zhang@durham.ac.uk

Supervisor name: Dr Anna Llewellyn; Dr Cristina Costa
Supervisor contact details: a.e.llewellyn@durham.ac.uk ; cristina.costa@durham.ac.uk

This form is to confirm that you understand what the purposes of the project, what is involved and that you are happy to take part. Please initial each box to indicate your agreement:

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated [17/02/23] for the above project.	
I have had sufficient time to consider the information and ask any questions I might have, and I am satisfied with the answers I have been given.	
I understand who will have access to information about my son/daughter and how the information will be stored and used.	
I agree for my son/daughter to take part in the above project.	
I understand that my son/daughter's participation is voluntary and that they are free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.	
I consent to my son/daughter being audio recorded and understand how this recording will be used.	
I understand that my son/daughter's words may be quoted in publications, reports, and other outputs after all identifying information has been removed.	
I understand that my son/daughter's online photos/screenshots of their profiles/posts may be used in publications, reports, and other outputs after being pixelated. Separate consent will be sought before any use of visual images.	

Parent's Signature_____ Date_____

(NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS) _____

Researcher's Signature_____ Date_____

(NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS) _____

Appendix 3: Interview schedule

First-round interviews

Before conducting each interview, I made it clear to the participants that:

> The purpose of my research is to explore your schooling experiences and your digital engagement with *Kuaishou*. I will ask questions about these two aspects. Please feel free to skip any questions you do not feel comfortable answering or do not know the answer to; you may simply say "no" without providing reasons. All your answers will be kept confidential, and I will not share them with anyone, including your teachers or classmates. Please feel free to share your thoughts, ideas and feelings. This is not an examination; there are no right or wrong answers, and I am not marking your responses. I am interested in your everyday life and your thoughts on things. I am not here as a teacher to judge you, but as a researcher interested in your stories. I greatly appreciate your participation, and you are welcome to ask me any questions at any time.

The sequence of questions varied depending on participants' responses. Follow-up questions were asked when appropriate.

Part 1: Warm-up question

1. What was your first impression of me? How about now?

Part 2: School life

2. Can you describe your typical school day, from waking up to bedtime?
3. Can you tell me a bit about your school experience? For example, use a few words or sentences to describe your feelings about school life.
4. What is your favourite and least favourite part of school life?
5. Do you think schooling is important? Why or why not?
6. How do you think your teachers view you? If they were asked to use three words to describe you, what do you think they would say?
7. How do you think your classmates or schoolmates view you? If they were asked to use three words to describe you, what do you think they would say?
8. How would you describe your relationships with others at school, such as classmates and teachers?

9. Who are the most popular students at school?

10. Have you ever violated school rules? (If yes) What happened, and how did you feel about it?

Part 3: Use of *Kuaishou*

11. What social media platforms do you use? Why?

12. How often do you post or share on *Kuaishou*? How much time do you spend on it?

13. What kinds of videos are you interested in on *Kuaishou*?

14. What content do you usually produce and share on *Kuaishou*, and why?

15. Why do you want to post on *Kuaishou*?

16. What is the most enjoyable part of using *Kuaishou*?

17. How many likes, shares, and comments do you usually receive? Are you satisfied with that? How do you feel when you receive likes and comments?

18. What makes someone popular on *Kuaishou*?

19. What are adults' opinions on your engagement with *Kuaishou*?

20. Overall, what role does *Kuaishou* play in your everyday life?

Second-round interviews

The second-round interviews also focused on these two areas, building on participants' earlier responses and my field observations. At the start of each second-round interview, I reminded participants of privacy and confidentiality, and reiterated that there were no right or wrong answers.

Appendix 4: Mind map of themes and subthemes
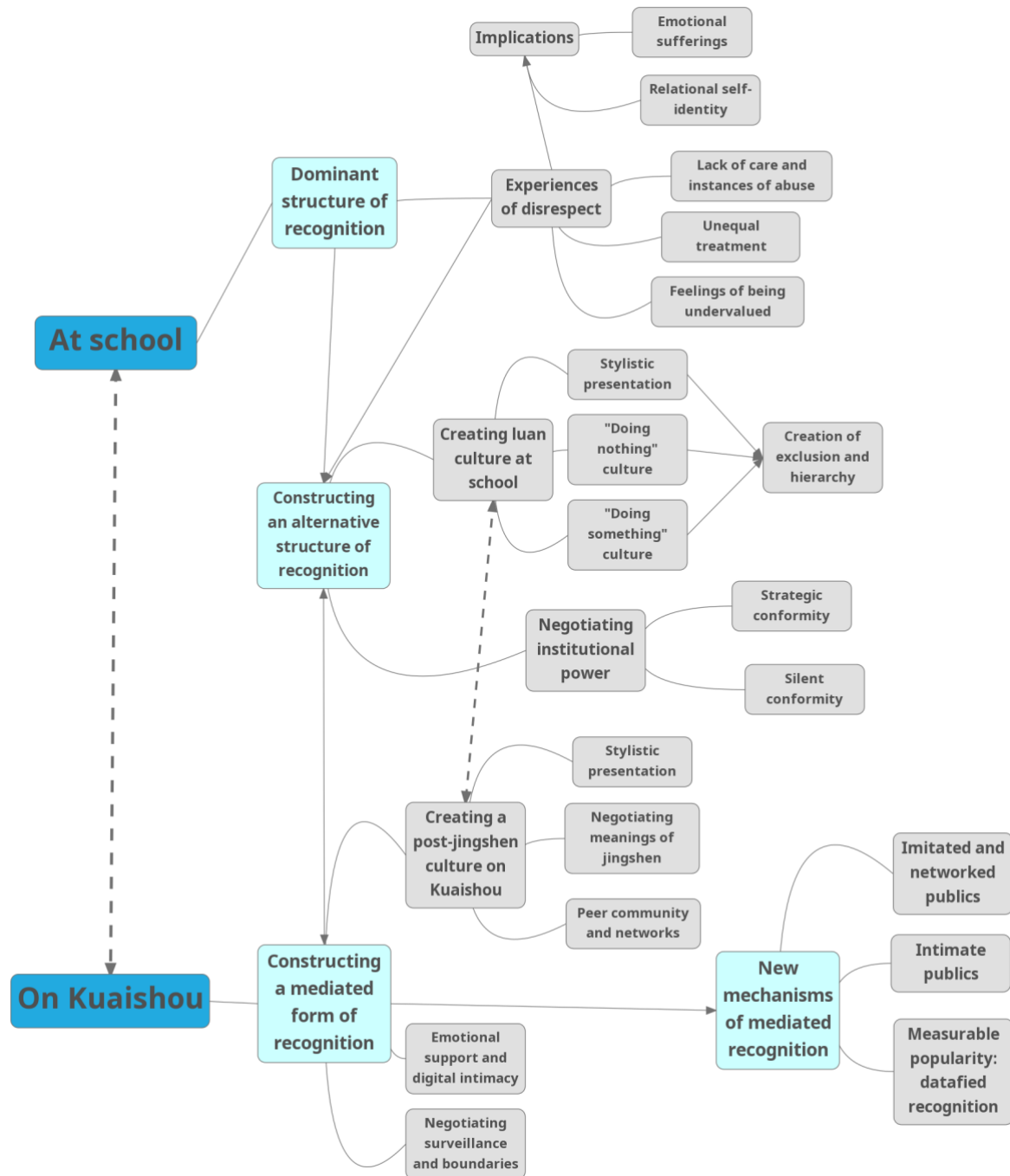
Appendix 5: Data corpus & Raw data exemplars

A5.1 Data Corpus Overview

The table below summarises the corpus of data collected and analysed for this study. The dataset combines materials generated during a fourteen-week period of in-school ethnography (April - July 2023) and online ethnography (May - August 2023) on *Kuaishou*.

Type of Data	Description	Duration / Quantity	Analytical status
Classroom observations	Observation of regular lessons across six classes in the school	15 classroom sessions (~15 hours total)	Fieldnotes and coded
Outside of classroom observations	Informal interactions, peer socialising, and leisure activities in dormitories, canteen, and playground	Continuous during field presence	Fieldnotes and coded
Student interviews	22 participants: two individual rounds + one pair interview	45 interviews (40-60 min each)	Fully transcribed and coded
Online observation - *Kuaishou*	Followed participants accounts and observed interactions	36 accounts (10 participants with one account, 10 with two, 2 with three)	Fieldnotes and coded
Online posts and screenshots	Participants' posts and profiles pages collected	~1,600 posts/screenshots + 36 profile screenshots	All transcribed to text-format and coded
Artefacts	Photographs of the school environment, timetable, photographs of students' creative objects	15 items	Contextual only

A5.2 Raw Data Exemplars (fully anonymised)
A5.2.1 Fieldnote Excerpt

Date: 8 May 2023 - Evening, school canteen and student dorms

Descriptive: I went to the canteen at about 9 p.m., when most students were buying buns as night snacks before bed. The teacher on duty told me to skip the queue, but I refused - I did not want to show teacher privilege. I wanted to show students that I was the same at least in some aspects. I could feel some students watching me.

I bought a bun and tried to look for students to talk to. Normally, I would feel quite awkward as the only adult and "teacher" in the dining hall (except the teacher on duty who was monitoring their behaviour) surrounded by so many students who were usually in groups, eating and chatting. For research purposes, I was trying hard to step out of my comfort zone and be sociable. Luckily, a few students came to talk to me. He Chao told me that he would give me the signed consent form tomorrow; Zhaocai said his parents were not at home last time, but he would give them the consent form this weekend.

I also met Zhang Mili, Ma Juan and Xiao Ying outside the canteen and later followed them back to their dormitory. They explained that dormitory assignments were based on students' entrance exam results, so "good students" were placed together, while those with lower academic performance were grouped in different dorms. The dorms usually housed twelve girls in six bunk beds. Opposite the door was a window, in front of which stood a single desk neatly lined with everyone's toothbrushes and mugs. It seems that the "good students" dormitories were quieter and orderly; girls were calmly preparing for lights-out, folding clothes or reviewing notes. In contrast, the dorm I visited was lively and chaotic. The students were still washing, teasing each other and visiting neighbouring rooms. Xiao Ying told me she sometimes couldn't fall asleep and would sneak into another dorm late at night to sleep on her friend Kaixin's bed. She knew it was against school rules, but she whispered that she usually went in the middle of the night, so no one would notice.

Analytical and reflexive: The spatial segregation between "good students" and "bad students" was clearly reproduced in the dormitories. The lively atmosphere in the "bad student" dorm reflects their social cohesion and more relaxed attitudes toward rules, alongside strategies for avoiding punishment. Xiao Ying's account also highlights the importance of friendship and

emotional support from peers within a tightly regulated school environment. For future observation, pay more attention to these informal spaces and peer interactions.

I made deliberate efforts to reduce the power dynamics between myself and the students, but in such a hierarchical school environment this remained challenging. I also realised how difficult it was to find natural topics of conversation. In the canteen, I found myself asking simple questions like "Have you eaten your bun?" or "Which flavour did you get?", after which the conversation often fizzled out. In the dormitory, I again felt out of place - wanting to talk to them but also aware that they were preparing for bed. I was conscious of needing to be careful with my words and tones to avoid sounding patronising, and of balancing rapport-building with respect for their routines and privacy.

A5.2.2 Interview Excerpt with Analytic Memo

Participant Wang Xu (male student, aged 15)

(Interview conducted in Mandarin; translated by the researcher)

Yuanya: What kind of students do you think are the most popular at school?

Wang Xu: I guess the top students - the ones with good grades. But deep down, I kind of want to be like those "gangster-type" students, like Luo Cheng and the others who are quite *luan* (disorderly).

Yuanya: Why is that?

Wang Xu: Because being with them makes me feel I have *mianzi* (face), so I won't lose face.

Yuanya: You mean, compared with the obedient students?

Wang Xu: Yes. Those who always listen to their parents are like *mabao* (mummy's boys). It's embarrassing. When parents pick up their kids at the school gate wearing their work clothes, I just feel ashamed.

Yuanya: So how does being with the *luan* group give you face?

Wang Xu: My mum doesn't let me wear colourful clothes. When I see them wearing those bright, flashy outfits, I really admire them. Every time I go out in town, I have to follow my parents.

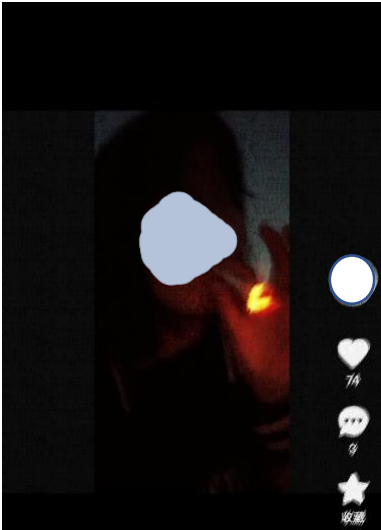**Yuanya:** You'd rather go out alone? Not with your parents?

Wang Xu: Yes.

Yuanya: But your parents don't allow that?

Wang Xu: Sometimes they do, but they're afraid I'll get into trouble - like doing something bad or getting caught by the police - so most of the time they don't let me.

Analytic Memo:

This conversation shows how *being luan* operates as an alternative form of status and recognition among students positioned as academically marginal. Wang Xu's admiration for the *luan* group reflects a search for dignity in contrast to the school's dominant norms of obedience. His preference for colourful clothes (youth style) and autonomy from parental control symbolises a desire for visibility and self-definition. Through this lens, *luan* is not merely deviant behaviour but a collectively constructed group identity that embodies solidarity, through which individuals gain validation and a sense of dignity.

A5.3 Online Data Exemplar

	This post features three young men taking mirror selfies, all shirtless and wearing similar styles of jeans and belts, with their underwear slightly visible above the waistline. **Analytical note:** This post reflects group membership and the display of a shared youth style, characterised by trendy jeans and belts, as well as the normalised online practice of mirror selfies as a performative mode of self-presentation.
	This post features a typical mirror selfie, but the participant also includes his cow in the frame. His caption reads: What a crap ex-girlfriend, not as pretty as my cow #NothingSpecial. **Analytical note:** This post combines a normalised online presentation style (mirror selfie) with humorous self-disclosure about romantic relationships.
	This post shows a girl smoking in a dimly lit setting, accompanied by the caption: #Bademotion. **Analytical note:** This image illustrates one of the typical features of *luan* (smoking) transferred into the online space; it also shows how participants use the platform to express emotional distress and seek empathy or support from peers.

This post is a typical example that presents the "intimacy score" of one's relationship. It shows the couple has achieved 2,444 points, reaching Grade 12, with 276 points required to advance to the next level.

Analytical note: This post demonstrates how participants publicly present romantic intimacy following the platform logics (intimacy scores), turning intimate relationships into quantifiable achievements.
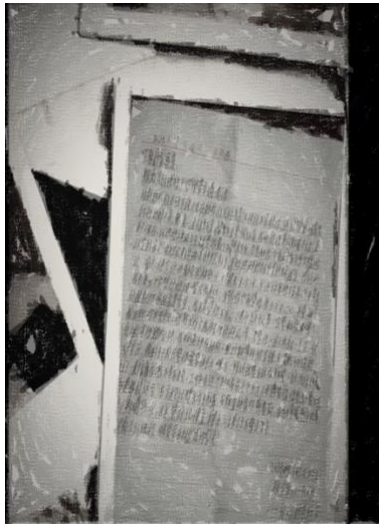
This post features a handwritten letter the girl received from a friend, expressing gratitude, friendship and care. The letter contains messages such as, "You are my best friend, my chosen family without blood ties" and, "School life can feel cold, but your companionship means everything. I'll always be by your side." The caption is a direct quote from the letter: She's anything but ordinary - she's the family I personally chose @her friend.

Analytical note: This post highlights the importance of friendship as emotional support and demonstrates how expressions of intimacy are publicly performed online to reinforce bonds and align with the group's shared culture of intimacy expression.

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