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Performative Possibilities in the Development of Protagonistic Agency

Among Graduate Students in China

A Dissertation by

Yan Wang

Chapman University

Orange, CA

College of Educational Studies

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

May 2020

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Joe Norris, Ph.D

May 2020

Performative Possibilities in the Development of Protagonistic Agency

Among Graduate Students in China

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, friends and colleagues in China, the United States, and other countries around the world who are currently locked down in their homes, villages, and communities in response to the coronavirus epidemic. I salute their bravery and determination and their efforts to help others during this time of global crisis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge the steadfast commitment to my well-being that my family has provided me throughout my entire life, and especially during this long, exciting, and arduous journey I have chosen in the field of academic study. My father once spent a year collecting discarded bottles to purchase me my first cell phone. That is the kind of commitment I am talking about. My mother and my sister have likewise sacrificed a great deal to provide me with the opportunity to take this journey. And my loving husband, Peter, has offered me constant encouragement, companionship, and support throughout this entire process, which has been a dramatic performance in itself.

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continents. The iconoclastic work of these women cleared pathways for my own work, and for many critical scholars in China, as well, for all of them have visited China multiple times to teach critical pedagogy, share their critical work in conferences, and have dialogues with Chinese scholars and students about viable ways to reinvent critical pedagogy in China. I am in debt to all of them. Suzi SooHoo, Chinese American warrior, is a fearless woman whom I would like to emulate throughout my life.

Dear professor Joe Norris, thank you for writing the book *Playbuilding as Qualitative Research: A Participatory Arts-based Approach* (Norris, 2009), I conducted my research largely through modeling your pathfinding book. This is the very book you wished you had when you were going through your doctoral research journey. What a beautiful continuity of inspiration!

I also wish to acknowledge my Chinese mentor, Dr. Yu, Wei. He led me to the field of critical pedagogy when he was mentoring my master's degree. Dr. Yu is one of the most passionate advocates of critical pedagogy in China. In 2015 and 2018, he and his team held the first and the second international conferences on critical pedagogy in China, which linked my Chinese academic family and my American academic family. Thank you, Dr. Yu and our "Yu family" (Dr. Yu and all his mentees).

I want to express my gratitude and love to my research team. They offered me their hearts, their stories, their time, and most importantly, their love. They are Guo Li, Qi Li, Da Li, Xiao Si, Xian Xin, Jia Lin, Da Lin, and David. I love each of you; and I love us together as a group.

ABSTRACT

Performative Possibilities in the Development of Protagonistic Agency

Among Graduate Students in China

by Yan Wang

Educational drama is a term that has in recent years achieved a pride of place in the field of arts-based research. During previous centuries, however, drama was considered anathema to formal learning and theaters themselves were considered “sinks of uncleanness” (Coggin, 1956, p. 38). Only in recent history has educational drama been considered a legitimate means of teaching and learning. While Dorothy Heathcote, Gavin Bolton, Richard Courtney and others have helped to legitimize the fecund role drama plays in learning, there has, to date, been a dearth of studies utilizing interdisciplinary approaches such as playbuilding (a participatory arts-based research methodology) in the context of critical pedagogy and its emphasis on developing critical self-reflexivity and critical praxis among students. Furthermore, little research of this nature has found its way into educational research in international settings. This current research project involves eight Chinese graduate student volunteers from a teacher training university in Northeast China who agreed to pursue the collective project of creating a theatrical production; and performing in front of a select audience of their peers and professors. The main part of the research (the collective creation of a play) took place over 5 weeks, with a total of 8 playbuilding sessions: two sessions each week, consisting of 6 hours per session, followed by a live theatrical performance. The fundamental question framing this research project is posed as follows: How can the process of playbuilding serve as a creative means for students to problem-pose their university experiences through the development of protagonistic agency (i.e., from the role of a spectator to that of an actor)? The researcher served as the lead researcher, facilitated the creation

of the play and served as an actor in the theatrical production. Her responsibilities were to introduce the students to improvisational drama, and the playbuilding approach, and to co-create with her participants conditions that would result in what the researcher named “protagonistic agency.” Throughout their collective creation process, the group demonstrated various ways to embody protagonistic agency.

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CHAPTER 1: THE BIRTH OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

A Living Methodology – “Being in Becoming”

This research is about a living methodology—“being in becoming”—about a research goal—developing protagonistic agency—and about a research methodology—playbuilding.

Chinese philosopher Tingyang Zhao (2016) used the term “being in becoming” to explain China in a methodological term. “Being in becoming” is my living philosophy and the spirit of my research. In this section of my dissertation, I briefly summarize the concept of “being in becoming” developed by Zhao to help the reader understand the intentionality behind my research design.

Chinese civilization has lasted for over 3,000 years and has never been irrevocably interrupted by other civilizations (except briefly by European colonizers and Japan from the second half of the 19th century to the first half of the 20th century). Instead of regarding a non-interrupted Chinese civilization as an indelible fact, Zhao (2016) saw it as a phenomenon that needs to be analyzed and explained. Zhao pondered the forces that drive Chinese civilization that make it so attractive and irresistible to people of different ethnicities in China for thousands of years.

If we think history carries some predetermined and ultimate goals, historicity is about the success and failures of some grand missions undertaken by heroic figures. If we see history as an ever-expanding process, historicity is about looking for ways to keep growing. China chose the latter (Zhao, 2016). Historicity, in the Chinese mind, is not a simple combination the accumulated stories, legends and events piled up in a linear fashion, but “the consistent and repeated structures/patterns¹ in the unrepeated stories” (Zhao, 2016, p. 36). In this sense,

¹ “The consistent and repeated structures/patterns” is similar to Jungian “collective unconsciousness” or “archetypes.” I touch on Jungian “collective unconsciousness” or “archetypes” in the last chapter.

historicity goes beyond phenomena and stories, and belongs to the metaphysical and existential realm. Chinese history is viewed as a process in which “philosophy and history complement each other”—as the story changes, the corresponding philosophy starts to shift (Zhao, 2016, p. vii).

“Being in becoming” suggests we do not cling to a static, unchanging, crystalized or uniform identity, but regard change as the essence (Zhao, 2016, p. 142). A famous line in the ancient Chinese book, *The Book of Changes* goes: Everything living in eternity exists through change (生生之谓易).

In some Western traditions, identity exists in isolation, separate from a world that is always in flux. Descartes argued, “I think, therefore I am.” To formulate Descartes’ famous line in the present tense, Descartes was saying you are who you are when you are thinking. Similarly, there is Shakespeare’s question “To be or not to be”? Being for Descartes or Shakespeare’s Hamlet, was about certainty—either to be or not to be. Being in itself has no dimension of time, therefore being in itself is disconnected from the fluctuations and movements of historical time (Zhao, 2016, p. 141). When being and becoming are perceived as coexisting, it guarantees openness, possibility, and flexibility. Life moves out of the indicative tense (it is) to the subjunctive (what if) tense; it becomes about possibility—“to do or not to do” rather than “to be or not to be.” Being and becoming makes possible the dimension of liminality, the seedbed of play, of improvisation (Turner & Bruner, 1986). Zhao (2016) concluded all meanings are defined by possibilities while certainty defines truth. The problem is that a world filled only with truth carries no meaning.

Things exist. They have the characteristic of being, but through the antithesis of being—which is becoming—concrete entities have the potential to become something else. Being and becoming are foundational concepts in ontology. As both subjects and objects in the world, we

share a dialectical interdependence with being and becoming. Freire (1970) famously maintained that the ontological vocation of all human beings is to become more human. Freire developed the idea that humanization is both an ontological and historical vocation. This is an exciting prospect, as each person is an open field of possibility, unconcluded beings, unfinished beings, conditioned, and historical beings. Being and becoming take place in the field of humanization which is the axial process in all Freirean pedagogy (Freire, 1970, 2001). The ontological, epistemological, ethical, and political all become entangled in the process of humanization. We are humanized by the way in which we think and act—as beings of praxis—which allows us to co-create the world by our capacities not only to reflect the world but to refract the world, that is to mediate the world (Freire, 1985, p. 70).

We humanize the world by our attempts to transform it in our struggle to create the conditions of possibility for liberation; simultaneously, we are vulnerable to becoming dehumanized by the world (Freire, 1985). However, being conscious of our unfinishedness is what creates the conditions of possibility of becoming educated (Freire, 1997b).

This dissertation examines how a group of Chinese graduate students were collectively looking for possibilities, constructing meanings, and embodying the notion of “being in becoming.” The essence of this dissertation is the research process, a collective process of a theatrical creation. A goal of the research is to develop protagonistic agency in the process of the collective creation.

This participatory arts-based research involves eight Chinese graduate students (six female and two male students) from a leading normal university in Northeast China. The group collectively devised a theatrical performance in the university setting, with an emphasis on students’ reflections and actions (what Freire calls praxis) on their university lives, with the goal

of providing a robust space for the development of protagonistic agency to be manifested on individual, collective, and public levels. The fundamental question framing this research project is: How can the process of playbuilding (the collective creation of a play) serve as a creative means for students to problem-pose their university experiences through the development of protagonistic agency (i.e., from the role of a spectator to that of an actor)?

Two subquestions help answer my primary research question, with each subquestion corresponding to specific playbuilding sessions. Subquestion 1 (first, second, and third playbuilding sessions): How do graduate students (my primary participants) articulate their identity and life experiences, and reflect upon their agency and positionality as protagonists in their lives within the university setting? Subquestion 2 (fourth, fifth, and sixth playbuilding sessions and the final performance): What happens when graduate students are given space and time to collectively problem-pose personal experiences and social norms, translate ideas into theatrical form, and theatrically perform elements of their lives as protagonists?

A Research Goal—Developing Protagonistic Agency

I developed the concept of protagonistic agency for this research project in China. There are two frames that come with the development of protagonistic agency in China: a cultural frame and an epistemological frame.

A Cultural Frame

In our daily lives, each of us is a protagonist in the world we perceive and construct. The question is how and on what levels we play the role of protagonist. People are unique in their social classes and various interpersonal contexts, with different knowledge bases, and carry with them particular family upbringings. Not everybody becomes a social justice warrior overnight, after hearing an inspiring revolutionary speech, or even after witnessing a great revolution. If I

want to struggle together with them, I have to be aware of where they are, and the intersectional aspects of their identity. I intend to first hear their stories and narratives about how they play the role of protagonist in their lives.

When I worked with my participants two years ago, all my female participants were young women in their 20s who had been in school for approximately 20 years; they had not officially stepped outside their school campuses since they were six or seven years of age. A popular narrative about the generations born during and after the 1980s is that they were born into a relatively peaceful epoch and are unfamiliar with war, poverty, class struggle, or revolutions. It is believed this unfamiliarity affects the construction of their desires, dreams, and everyday preoccupations. I was born in 1986. I too am part of the narrative. My generation did not experience armed revolutions. Nevertheless, my generation, products of the One Child Policy, was saddled with heavy parental expectations. We were expected by our parents and teachers to not think about, or become preoccupied by, anything other than being highly successful at school-related activities. My participant, Guo Li, expressed to the group that studying has been the only meaningful criterion for her existence so far. She does not know what else to do and she is not the only Chinese student who feels this way.

We were born into a market economy and a culture of competition that preached there was no excuse for individual failure. We were raised in a culture that worships wealth. There is a popular saying in modern day China: You will be laughed at for being poor; not for being a rich prostitute (笑贫不笑娼). My participants struggled to learn and adapt to the rules of society, as those rules form an essence that must be possessed rather than features of methodologies that can be appropriated in the process of self and social transformation. Many of us have similar preset goals in life—a good job, a big house, a happy family, and a smart child—as if these

predetermined goals are the most fundamental achievements in life, to be checked off as items on a grocery list. The future is about individual goals and competition not possibilities.

If we crystalize the rules of society in relation to achieving the most purposive goals in life, then it is easy to reduce life to the imperatives of individualism, competition, and isolation. In contrast, if we see rules of society as ever-changing, if we can respect, accept, and celebrate diversity in various fields, then life is about community, possibility, and connectedness.

If life is ever-changing, we are the change agents. Since this research is intended to be carried out through dramaturgy, I have chosen to name this kind of agency protagonistic agency. The concept resonates with the emphasis on the role of protagonists in a drama.

In this research I ask if student agency is mainly manifested on an individual level and mainly related to success in school. Could critical pedagogy—in particular its theatrical and arts-based companions or complements known as playbuilding—serve as a theoretical and practical means of fostering protagonistic agency on a collective and public level?

My Epistemological Frame—A Critical Constructionist

I am a critical constructionist. I find my grounding in critical traditions, most specifically a Freirean approach and a toned-down Marxist approach to critical pedagogy.

A Freirean Approach to Critical Pedagogy: My research approach has its epistemological wheelhouse in the field of critical constructionism, in which I focus on creating activities which can expose the ways knowledge is mediated and often subjugated throughout our daily existence. The constructionist epistemology that guided me was the idea that humans construct knowledge and meaning from their experiences—which is firmly set against a positivist approach to knowledge construction. In this study, I opened up dialogical spaces that enabled students to understand the contextual layers of their lives, to understand how the knowledge they hold about

themselves is temporally, culturally, and historically situated. I paid attention to the socio-cultural context of knowledge construction and how it can serve as a referent or touchstone for the development of student voice.

I adopted a Freirean position that asserted we live in a world where domination and oppression exist and where no perspective or social relation can claim to be neutral (Freire, 1970). While being a critical thinker in the Freirean sense implies being an agent of change (Freire, 1970), it also suggests being an epistemically virtuous person, a person who is honest, discerning in judgment, humble (SooHoo, 2006, 2013), and who exercises her capacity for benevolence (Wood, 1998).

A Toned-Down Marxist Approach to Critical Pedagogy

All Chinese students from secondary to graduate school study selected Marxist theory. Growing up in China, I identify as a Marxist scholar. I agree with Marx that consciousness is a reflection of the political economy and social relations of production, and that “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (Marx, 1859, para. 6). I agree the mode of production of material life determines the social and intellectual life of the students—the state capitalist mode of production that underlies all of social and economic life in China. I support Marxism’s protean focus on proletarian self-activity and the self-organization of the popular majorities.

While all value originates in the sphere of production and a main role of schools is to serve as agents or functionaries of capital, I did not approach this study as a Marxist analysis of class, as this would have put my participants in a dangerous situation, which in turn would have prohibited this research from ever taking place. My intention was not to lead the students into a militantly counterhegemonic stance against their university or the larger government of China.

That would have been counterproductive to my goal given the sophisticated forms of surveillance and censorship that exist in Chinese society. I further elaborate on this ideological issue in Chapter 2.

One of the approaches to critical pedagogy that informed my research came from conversations with McLaren and SooHoo about the classes they cotaught at the university where I conducted my research. They both insisted, for critical approaches to teaching and learning to take root in China, critical educators need to take an incremental, step-by-step approach and not lean too heavily on the rhetoric of revolution and the struggle to overturn the state capitalist system (McLaren et al., 2017). I accepted McLaren and SooHoo's recommendation to take small but significant steps toward developing an approach that would foster more active participation and self-reflection in Chinese education and sought to help the students become more actively engaged in thinking about their experiences as graduate students. I initially developed the concept of protagonistic agency based upon literatures on body, voice, critical consciousness, and the spirit of collectivism.

The Concept of Protagonistic Agency

Protagonistic Agency and Body

To engage in protagonist agency is to transition across boundaries and borders, beyond an individual's comfort zone into a realm where praxis is paramount. We do not just connect, transform, and reinvent ourselves in our mind. If we do not pay attention to our bodies and our behaviors, all of our efforts for transformation could be in vain.

What is a body? McLaren (1995) referred to the body as a "body/subject," a terrain of the flesh in which meaning is inscribed or a site of embodied or "enfleshed" subjectivity. McLaren linked the constitution of the body/subject to a relationship among modes of desire, modes of

production, and modes of subjectivity. Modes refer to the different ways aspect of the social are constructed. Unlike Platonic idealism, notions of desire, production, and subjectivity are historically and culturally specific. For some philosophers (Bloch, 1986; Brenkman, 1985; Turner, 1984), desire is structured by the social relations of material production. Brenkman (1985) stated desire is mediated by desires for and of the other. In this sense, desire is “related to the institutional framework of society as it organizes the satisfaction of human desire and through the desire of others” (Brenkman, 1985, p. 189).

Our bodies are socially constructed and morally “contaminated.” Eagleton (1985/6) viewed the mode of production of human subjects as the most central mode of production. According to Eagleton, there exists a history of techniques for the (re)production of human subject, among which “moral technology” has been ignored. Eagleton (1985/6) described moral technology as “a particular set of techniques and practices for the instilling of specific kinds of value, discipline, behavior, and response in human subjects” (pp. 96-97). Moral technology is designed to regulate and control the emotive and experiential aspects of subjectivity which are important in the formation of our humanity. In our collective theatrical creation, our bodies were involved, examined, challenged, and reconstructed through games and performances.

Protagonistic Agency and Voice

This research attempted to demystify the dominant, master discourses impeding my participants’ development of protagonistic agency and encourage the students to define themselves as active participants in the world. As hooks (1994) stated, “The revolutionary hope that I bring to the classroom is that it will become a space where they can come to voice” (p. 53). Protagonistic agency demands the cultivation of voice. Understanding McLaren’s (2015) construction of the notion of voice is important.

Voice is an important pedagogical concept because it alerts teachers to how all discourse is situated historically and mediated culturally and derives part of its meaning from interaction with others. Although the term voice may refer to an internalized, private discourse, such a discourse cannot be understood without situating it in a universe of shared meanings, that is, in the symbols, narratives, and social practices of the community or culture in which the dialogue is taking place. . . . How students, teachers, and others define themselves and name experience is a central pedagogical concern because it helps educators understand how classroom meaning is produced, legitimated, or delegitimated. (p. 180)

To have one's voice heard and be taken into consideration is to lay claim to be the author of one's own history, with a reflective and a constructive force. It does not mean you are in control of your history, because our individual voice operates within capitalist social relations of production, which is outside of any individual's control. That is why we need to build collective voice to address and counter structural conditions. But having your voice does mean that you are in control of your choices—that is, to claim the choices open to you when confronted by various obstacles in your life. In this research project, I intended to practice agency beyond the personal level with my participants. My preference was a collective voice in a collective movement. McLaren has written about the collective authorship of voices indicating we are responsible for each other's wellbeing.

The concept of voice acknowledges the political and pedagogical processes at work in the construction of forms of authorship within different institutional and social spheres. ...

Voices must always imply the notion of collective agency as political praxis. ... Here, the

struggle for voice becomes a dynamic unfolding of human mindfulness, intentionality, and personal and social responsibility to both self and other. (McLaren, 2015, p. 181)

Protagonistic agency and critical consciousness: Marx (1844) viewed the creation of critical consciousness as powerful as a material force. Marx (1844) stated, “The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism of the weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses” (para. 7).

Protagonistic Agency in a Collective Project

Why a collective creation? Why a collective way of being? The struggle for social justice is an ongoing battle. Capitalists benefit from reproducing the repressive system of power and privilege largely responsible for the economic inequality we see today. People who have little or no power are paid to obey the rules; they are not rewarded or paid to resist or struggle. If we want to struggle for fairer rules and a better society, we need to connect with each other. We have to survive without assurances that we will be able to feed and look after our families; we have to thrive without assurances that we will even succeed. We demand both bread and roses in life. We form solidarity with our fellow strugglers. The concept of collective being serves as a counter-narrative to individualistic profit-driven ideology in a capitalist society.

My participants mentioned competition in various situations. We seem to be dominated, and often hurt, by the mindset of competition and comparison. Competition has a monopoly on power and evaluation criteria. Competition is a zero-sum game—a situation where what is gained by one person or group is taken from another person or group. The mindset of competition produces an alienated individualistic identity. My understanding of alienation comes from Marx’s (2000a, 2000b) *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and *The German*

Ideology. Alienation is a feeling of estrangement from aspects of an individual's "species-being" or "species essence" that is the result of living in a society consisting of stratified social classes. Alienation includes boredom, disaffection, and a feeling of separation from the self as a consequence of being part of the mechanical or commodified aspects of capitalist society. Alienation occurs when we lose our agency and voice, when we lose the ability to determine our life and destiny. How can we move beyond alienation? We need to form a collective identity around socialist solidarity to challenge the capitalist means of production, the core structure of a capitalist society (Marx & Engels, 1967). I see "forming a collective identity" and "challenging the capitalist means of production" in a dialectical relationship—a dialectic is not about "either or" but about "both and." American feminist theorist and physicist Karen Barad brilliantly framed the concept of agency.

Agency for me is not something that someone or something *has* to varying degrees, since I am trying to displace the very notion of independently existing individuals. This is not, however, to deny agency in its importance, but on the contrary, to rework the notion of agency in ways that are appropriate to relational ontologies. Agency is not held, it is not a property of persons or things; rather, agency is an enactment, a matter of possibilities for reconfiguring entanglements. So, agency is not about choice in any liberal humanist sense; rather, it is about the possibilities and accountability entailed in reconfiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production, including the boundary articulations and exclusions that are marked by those practices. (Dolphijn & Tuin, 2012, p. 54)

Based on related literature and the cultural and epistemological frames used in this research, I developed the concept of protagonistic agency as a goal of my research process. In the spirit of “being in becoming,” the concept is not fixed but rather in continuous development.

My Definition of Protagonistic Agency

Protagonistic agency begins with a cultivation of student voice, which occurs when individuals are challenged to become critically conscious about their lives, surroundings, and possible futures. The more individuals become critically conscious, the more likely they are to enter into the domain of praxis, of thinking and doing—of acting in and on the world—what Freire referred to “reading the word and the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 20). A volitional action is an intentional action, a transitive action, the embodiment or “enfleshment” of an argument for a particular cause—in my case, creating a space in a Chinese university context for the cultivation of voice and the deepening of protagonism. The goal of creating a collective creation team was to create the conditions for a group of Chinese students to develop and take control of narratives—and, in some cases, create counter-narratives—to redefine themselves as active actors in their own history rather than passive objects of history.

The protagonistic agent has an awareness of her actions and works to gain control over those. A protagonistic agent is a vociferous proponent of social justice, fully aware of the necessary power of her voice—and those of her fellow agents—to be heard. The purpose is to merge protagonism with critical consciousness, to give impetus to students’ participation in the narratives that can define them as critical agents for self and social change. This development of protagonist agency is consistent with critical pedagogy’s concept of political and critical agency, of liberators’ praxis.

There are seven components to protagonistic agency: narrative, intentionality, critical consciousness, a good cause (or for a collective good), counter-narrative, praxis (connecting body and mind; theory and practice), and student voice (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The seven components to protagonistic agency.

There is a dialectical relationship between the concept of protagonistic agency and my research process, a playbuilding process. The concept of protagonistic agency drives my research design. As our theatrical research process proceeds, the drive, the concept of protagonistic agency, evolved, allowing for a potential additional component to emerge. It is for that reason there is an empty/open space in Figure 1.

A Research Methodology—Playbuilding

The relationship between my research goal—the development of a protagonistic agency—and my research methodology—playbuilding, as a participatory arts-based research methodology—can be seen as the relationship between content and form. From the perspective

of archetypal criticism, there is no form in its purest sense; if we have to explain the relationship between the content and the form, the form is both the crystallization and sublimation of the content (Yeh, 1988, p. 264). It is imperative to ensure the compatibility between my methodology and my research goals. In this section, I elaborate on the history and major characteristics of playbuilding (Norris, 2009).

Playbuilding was originally designed as a pedagogical vehicle for social change (Norris, 2009). Norris did not invent playbuilding; with his Mirror Theatre group, they made explicit the research dimensions of playbuilding as a qualitative research genre (Norris, 2000, 2008). Mirror Theatre honors students and/or community members' authentic voices, and while reflecting life to the audience, they received meanings generated by the audience and the theatre team (Norris, 2009).

Playbuilding as a methodology is part of what is called arts-based research (Barone & Eisner, 2012). As an interdisciplinary approach, playbuilding combines empirical research with dramatic arts. Norris (2009) emphasized each discipline has its own set of rules thus interdisciplinary work cannot be simply a product of hybridization; interdisciplinary work operates more like a new discipline with its own characteristics.

Norris (2009) stated there are multiple methods of playbuilding. Contrasting a positivist perspective with a constructivist point of view, there is no single measure of an objective reality to be discovered but rather multiple interpretations of realities ready to be constructed through the telling and retelling stories and the shaping and reshaping of one's contextualized reality. Playbuilding has to do with the creation of a narrative that acknowledges participants will describe their perceptions of reality differently. I offer my version of the whole devising process through my dissertation. As the same process could sound very different as participants shared

their versions of the process, all participants were encouraged to keep journals and record their feelings, reflections, and theatrical inspirations as a form of research inquiry.

Playbuilding regards using imagination through role-playing as a rich data source. One way of critically (re)telling our stories is to go back to the context where the event occurred, then ask what if questions. In Nita Freire's (2014) terminology, the question what if can be described as untested feasibility. All seemingly complicated stories begin with simple ideas: What if? These what if questions invite the imagination to open up possibilities and alternatives into a seemingly dead and static story frozen in the past. In an imaginary theatrical space, the group can improvise what happened and look for alternative solutions or perspectives. What if I looked for help, instead of being quiet and intimidated when I was in an abusive situation? Through playbuilding and improvisational techniques, the group opens up a space for change, transformation, and empowerment to happen.

Playbuilding is a collaborative and spiral process, with a focus on participation (Bishop, 2014; Norris, 2009). It is a spiral process because data generation, data interpretation, and data presentation/dissemination can happen simultaneously at each stage of the devising process, in contrast to a traditional linear research process, where data gathering, data interpretation, and data dissemination happen consecutively. Each participant has multiple roles in the team, coresearcher, playwright, actor/actress, in addition to whatever talents they offer. Unavoidably, decision-making is a challenging issue as the group learns how to collaborate in the process.

Operationalized within the social justice milieu of critical pedagogy, playbuilding is concerned with the epistemological debates surrounding the purpose and meaning of knowledge and knowledge production (Bishop, 2014; Norris, 2009). Participants discuss what knowledge is valued most in our society, whose knowledge/stories enjoy higher social status, whether or not

personal stories should be taken into account and appreciated in the academic realm, and the difference between research with people and research on people.

Playbuilding's dissemination process emphasizes equal power between researchers and participants and between the research group and the audience. In a traditional qualitative research project, we often see a dualistic relationship between the researcher and participants, and between the research group and audience. Can a researcher be an impartial observer who tracks, takes notes, and records but never gets involved? Do the participants merely reveal themselves objectively to the researcher? Can a researcher make assumptions about the targeted audiences/participants and predict their reactions, through research technique, including observations, interviews, and questionnaires? Is it ethical for the researcher to decide what the audience/participants should know? What role(s) does/could the audience/participants play? In keeping with the principles of a participatory arts-based research project, it would be more authentic if we could present this research in the form of theatre, such as the Forum Theatre invented by Augusto Boal. According to Boal (2002), in a Forum Theatre, the actors initially act out a problematic/oppressive scene in front of the audience and then repeat the performance. During the second performance, the audience is invited to play a role if they have an idea about how to intervene in the scene—how to alter the situation. In this process, the audience is no longer a passive spectator but instead what Boal called “spect-actors.” For Boal, an actor is a person who acts. At the same time, the researchers—which could also include the actors—do not have to assume the attitude of the audience and can instead interact with each other.

For Norris (2009), one of the main purposes of playbuilding performance was to generate dialogue between the performing/research team and the audience. The research team—in this project, the lead researcher and the participants, graduate students at NENU—and the audience

learn from each other and collectively construct meanings. Through playbuilding's dissemination process, audience members can tilt or rewrite the play with each interactive performance, creating and nurturing a dialogical and ethical relationship.

Playbuilding is not an easy process to initiate or facilitate. In a book review interview on playbuilding (Chenail, 2010), Norris admitted the process of conducting plays is “emotionally challenging” and “emotionally draining for all of us.” However:

We can end up seeing that this emotional investment can bring wonderful feeling in return as we give voice to the silenced, put into the spotlight that which has been left in the dark too long, and bring audience into a space where they can never quite see their world in the same way again. (Chenail, 2010, pp. 1287-1288)

Playbuilding from a critical perspective uses narratives and counternarratives (what if questions) to construct and reconstruct meanings collectively, with the goal of honoring students' voice and social justice. The major characteristics of playbuilding resonate with the key components of protagonistic agency. My research process is about how playbuilding serves as a creative and theatrical means for the development of protagonistic agency.

Relationship Between Theatre of the Oppressed and Playbuilding

What is the relationship between Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 2006) and playbuilding? Norris adopted many theatrical techniques from the work of Augusto Boal. While acknowledging the power of the Theatre of the Oppressed, Norris, and his Mirror Theatre team conducted self-examinations, discussed intersectionality, and challenged a dualistic situation of the oppressed versus the oppressor. For the purpose of comparison, Norris stated he could have named his Mirror Theater the Theatre of the Oppressor because they often functioned as both the oppressed and the oppressor (personal communication, April 2018).

I agree with Norris on our daily roles as both the oppressed and as the oppressor. My rationale in choosing playbuilding as my methodology is because playbuilding emphasizes both performance and interactions with audiences and the process of making a drama, which in itself constitutes a powerful social action. Because of this difference, Theatre of the Oppressed mainly aims to transform the audience from the role of spectator to actor. Playbuilding also focuses on the performer's step-by-step transformation from the role of spectator to actor. Since I was inspired by some of the stories behind the Theatre of the Oppressed, I incorporated some of their games into my research process.

If the Theatre of the Oppressed were a tree (Boal, 2006), Forum Theatre would be represented as a tree trunk. For Boal (2006), Forum Theater or the Theatre of the Oppressed focused on the creation of conditions in which the oppressed could develop their thoughts and their capacity to dream, imagine, and create a reality in which they want to live. In this context, theater functions as a rehearsal for initiating change in the concrete world.

One story about the creation of Forum Theatre shared by Augusto Boal (1995) in his classic *The Rainbow of Desire* touched me deeply. The transformation Boal (1995) experienced through a “theatrical encounter” (p. 1) is the kind of transformation I have desperately longed for. In the early 1960s, Boal's theatre company went into the poorest areas in Brazil and taught peasants to examine their lives that were overburdened by hardship and oppression. One day, the team came to a small village in the Northeast and performed revolutionary musical plays for local peasants which included lines such as “Let us spill our blood” (Boal, 1995, p. 2). The audiences were really captivated. After the play, one peasant came to the actors and invited them to join him for a bloody revolution. Boal and his team tried to explain to the peasant that as artists, they carry fake guns for the purpose of the play, but in terms of creating a revolution, they

would be more of a hindrance than a help. The peasant did not understand. He said, “But you people aren’t fakes, you’re genuine, I saw you singing about how blood must be spilled, I was there . . . so come with us, we have guns enough for everyone” (Boal, 1995, p. 3) Boal’s explanation was not as convincing as his play. “We are true to the cause, absolutely. But we are true artists not true peasants! Virgilio, come back, let’s talk about it...” The peasant realized “when you true artists talk of the blood that must be spilt, this blood you sing about spilling—it’s our blood you mean, not yours” (Boal, 1995, p. 3). The peasant never returned to see the rest of the plays.

Boal (1995) felt ashamed of his art. One of Che Guevara’s lines helped Boal understand what went wrong. According to Boal (1995), Che said, “Solidarity means running the same risks” (cited in Boal, 1995, p. 4). Boal realized if they, the artists, could not stand side-by-side with people and share their struggles, the artists neither had the right nor the authority to tell the people what to do or how to resolve their problems. The people have the wisdom and opportunity to offer solutions and to implement them. This is one of the incidents that gave birth to what later came to be known as “Forum Theatre.” In Forum Theatre, all spectators are potential “spect-actors”—people who participate or act.

Relationship Between Playbuilding, Critical Pedagogy, and Improvisation

My theatrical project is inspired by and based on the theory and practice generated by the methodology of playbuilding (Bray, 1991; Norris, 2009) and the theatrical tradition of improvisation (Dudeck, 2013a, 2013b; Johnstone, 1987; Spolin, 1999), with critical pedagogy as the theoretical foundation informing the research design and ethics plan. All of these approaches seek interactive and meaningful participation to both stimulate and deepen our understanding of spontaneous and collective theatrical creations. Meanwhile, playbuilding,

improvisation, and critical pedagogy share a goal of making progressive changes, in terms of our perceptions of ourselves, our relationships with others, and the way we view our situatedness with and within the world.

Imbedding Critical Pedagogy in a Playbuilding Project

A playbuilding process helps participants expand their perceptions of reality, or reexamine their positionalities, including their geopolitical location. Critical pedagogy is a philosophy of praxis whose practitioners understand teaching and learning as a means of negotiating one's political and moral agency within the context of powerful economic and sociopolitical forces that exist in society at large. Critical pedagogy encourages people to "develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (Freire, 2003, p. 83). Freire (2001) said, "We know ourselves to be conditioned but not determined" (p. 26). As Macedo noted, "Objectivity always contains within it a dimension of subjectivity; thus, it is dialectical" (cited in Freire, 2001, p. xii). Objective reality only makes sense when you make the attempt to examine it. Otherwise, we are able to ignore it, or select those aspects that fit with our subjective desires. Objective reality is too often reduced to a backdrop against our own, private and self-selecting concepts. While the larger world of poverty, pain, and suffering may seem irrelevant to us at times, this does not mean we are not influenced by that bigger reality. One of the differences rests on the extent to which you are motivated to know the world outside of the subjective bubble we fill with select friends, family members, and activities. We negotiate meanings emotionally, philosophically, and in action, on a personal level, a collective level, and a public level.

A playbuilding process emphasizes creative freedom. Critical pedagogy is about freedom and responsibilities. Freire (2003) stated:

The “fear of freedom” which afflicts the oppressed. . . . One of the basic elements of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed is prescription. . . . Thus, the behavior of the oppressed is a prescribed behavior, following as it does the guidelines of the oppressor. . . . Freedom would require them to reject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility. (pp. 46-47)

Playbuilding and critical pedagogy are both centered on reflection and action (praxis). Praxis occurs when the acts of reflective learning and doing are mutually informing, dialectical, or what Freire described as co-constitutive (Freire, 2003). It is part of a larger pedagogical process, what Freire referred to as reading the word and the world. Myles Horton, the great Appalachian scholar and founder of the famous Highlander School in Tennessee, asserted it is impossible to teach anyone anything. Instead, what researchers can do, and should do, is create the conditions necessary for participants to learn (Horton & Freire, 1990; McLaren, 2015). Creating conditions that enable learning to take place is not an easy task. In the spirit of culturally responsive methodology (Berryman et al., 2013), creating conditions that enable learning requires an understanding of participants’ (or students’) experiences, their social locations in society, their history, and their contextual ways of understanding and developing aspects of their personal and professional agency.

While China may have overcome feudal and colonial oppression and emerged from “100 years of humiliation” (Alison, 2010), it has joined the transnational capitalist states in a global market dominated by neoliberalism. Its major industries remain state-owned. Land remains collectivized and leased to private individuals for a maximum of 70 years (Chen et al., 2018).

Private entrepreneurship is practiced with the condition that companies follow strict rules regarding worker well-being. Strikes and protests are vigorously crushed, and political dissent is silenced. The officially stated goal of the Chinese Communist Party is “Fully Developed Socialism by 2050” (Kuhn, 2017).

China is a centralized state with its political environment than a decentralized state such as the U.S. In a context of global capitalism, in the name of national renaissance, developmentalism, and modernity, a centralized government can legitimate its unparalleled power with respect to resource absorption and mass mobilization. In the context of a global pandemic crisis (such as current coronavirus pandemic), a centralized government shows is advantageous to distributing resources and initiating national emergency rules to efficiently manage damage control. Still, in a centralized state, there are only two binary political positions, patriot or traitor. It is not easy to be a critical patriot. It should therefore not be surprising that the level of acceptance and reaction of the Chinese people and Chinese government toward criticism differs from the U.S. context.

How is it possible to implement the key tenants of critical pedagogy in a political environment like China? In this theatrical project, one of the major goals is to provide the conditions for raising of critical consciousness and creating the pedagogical conditions for students to empower themselves by engaging in critical practices. A feasible way to achieve some success in this venture in China is by embedding the spirit and the key tenants of critical pedagogy in a playbuilding process.

Improvisation and Critical Pedagogy

Psychoanalyst Carl Jung (1933) regarded the human psyche as comprised of separate interacting systems. The three main components of the human psyche are the ego (the conscious

mind), the personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious. One important feature of the personal unconscious Jung referred to as complexes meaning a collection of thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and memories that focus on a single concept. The most important difference between Jung and Freud was Jung's notion of the collective unconscious—"a level of the unconscious shared with other members of the human species comprising latent memories from our ancestral and evolutionary past" (McLeod, 2018, para, 13).

We are bound to be part of the world at the political, social, and economic structural levels and on the level of (un)conscious. A process of conscientization means activating unconscious and "natural" thoughts and behaviors at the conscious level to critically examine them. This process of activation can also be explained by the surrealist phrase, making the familiar strange and the strange familiar. To trigger the activation, I need to match my research methodology (the form) with my research goals (or the research content). One way to reveal our unconscious mind is through improvisation.

A practitioner and teacher of improvisation, Dudeck (2013a), described Johnstone's improv system as "an approach to actor training and theatre practice that encourages spontaneous, collaborative creation using the intuitive, uncensored imaginative responses of the participants" (p. 2). Accessibility is a code word for both Dudeck and Johnstone. This is partly due to Johnstone's legendary theatre and his emphasis on immediacy and the peeling away of mystification layers which prevent individuals from discovering themselves.

According to Dudeck (2013a), celebrating intuition, spontaneity, and immediacy does require "a complete shutdown of the intellect but rather closing the gap that divides rhetoric from actions" (p. 6). Creativity, imagination, action, and improvisation cannot stand alone as they all require a context and contents to function. A content, which could refer to a specific situation, is

situated in a historical, cultural, and political context, and can be better understood in a theoretical framework.

Critical pedagogy and improvisation overlap and share many similarities. Dudeck (2013a), who identifies as a Johnstonian Freirean scholar, frequently quoted Freire in her work. Both Keith Johnstone, one of the key figures in the world of improvisation, and Paulo Freire, one of the founding fathers of critical pedagogy, emphasized the importance of the concepts of consciousness, spontaneity, risks-taking, failure, and dialogue. Both saw their work developing through distinct stages. To explain the relationship between Johnstone and Freire's dialectical approach to theory/practice, we need to first distinguish two pairs of terms—real consciousness and potential consciousness, and ingenuous (unarmed) curiosity and epistemological curiosity (Freire, 2001).

According to Dudeck (2013a), the improv system is about how to be obvious rather than trying to be smart or overthinking your responses; it is concerned with how to take risks, be spontaneous, live in the present moment, and how to engage audiences through a circle of probability. Dudeck (2013a) wrote:

It was the first time a teacher encouraged me to take risks and to fail good-naturedly; to accept my first spontaneous impulses in lieu of clever or intellectual ideas; to acknowledge my imagination, not my socially-constructed “personality,” as my true self; and to be more obvious, since trying to be original only concealed the real me. (p. 3)

For Dudeck (2013a), self-consciousness and fear are socially constructed responses to everyday life which need to be negated to give space to the imagination, to find a person's real consciousness. In contrast, Freire (2001) argued we are conditioned by sociohistorical reality and our real consciousness emerges from the realization/awareness of these constraints. By

acknowledging these social conditions and being willing to open oneself to others unconditionally (to love others and be loved), imagination and creativity will flourish. Freire (2001) adopted the term potential consciousness to mean our “ontological vocation to intervene in the world” (p. 55).

The core difference between ingenuous (unarmed) curiosity and epistemological curiosity is that “the knowledge produced by spontaneous or almost spontaneous teaching practice is ingenuous in the sense that it lacks the methodological rigor that characterizes the epistemological curiosity of a reflecting subject” (Freire, 2001, p. 43). Johnstone has mainly pursued ingenuous curiosity, which is essential and hard to achieve. There is a dialectical relationship between ingenuous curiosity and epistemological curiosity (Freire, 2001), as explained by Freire in the following remarks:

....good sense leads into critical epistemology, without which good sense is likely to lead to erroneous conclusions. However, critical epistemology without good sense, without the capacity to ‘divine,’ to follow a hunch, to be open to doubt, to be humble enough to know that one can err, is a recipe for failure. (p. 62)

Johnstone said, “I don’t think you’ve got the right to fail unless you care very much about the thing that’s failing” (Dudeck, 2013a, p. 63). I interpret this as acting with intention, with protagonistic agency, with agential fullness, and a good-natured approach to the act of failing. Without a critical lens, the performative act of teaching could turn into a pure and empty spectacle (hooks, 1994).

A philosophy of praxis refers to combining theory and practice, to combining thinking and doing. Improv is one of the most natural, honest and powerful ways to practice/act, with

critical pedagogy providing the reflexive framework and preparing the actors and the spect-actors for the next round of actions.

Roadmap of the Research

In Chapter 1, I delineated my living philosophy that served as the philosophical spirit of the research, the major components of the concept of protagonistic agency that guided the research process, the rationale behind my chosen research methodology, and the relationship between a participatory arts-based approach and a critical perspective. Chapter 2 provides a historical context as the research context, tease out some major tenants of critical pedagogy, and reviews some relevant theatrical literature. Chapter 3 laid out the methodological procedure. Chapters 4 and 5 constituted a detailed account of the research project and a methodological analysis of the process. These two chapters preliminarily answered my research question: How can the process of playbuilding (the collective creation of a play) serve as a creative means for students to problem-pose their university experiences through the development of protagonistic agency? In the final chapter, I reflected upon our collective creation process, from my perspective and the perspectives of my participants, with the refined components of protagonistic agency being the thread of the reflection.

CHAPTER 2: A HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

The review of the literature begins with an overview of Chinese contemporary history (1840-1949), the development of modern universities in China, and the Chinese pioneering intellectuals who were nurtured by the early modern universities. The second part of the literature review includes a brief history of critical pedagogy and the state of critical pedagogy in China. These histories and practices are meant to provide insight into why critical pedagogy is needed in the Chinese university context and to situate the stories or activities generated by my research group in a historical context. The literature review concludes with a review of the development of modern educational drama in the West, including playbuilding, an introduction to classic Chinese theatre (*xiqu*), and a review of the research on general drama education in China.

Widening the Lens: A Historical Context of the Study

Pinar (2012) stated:

Most people think of history as a distant even muffled, sound made by an orchestra over which they have no control, not as embedded in the psychology of their physical lives.

What allegory emphasizes is that not only does the present resound in the inner languages of emotion and fantasy; its progenitor, the past—splintered into millions of indecipherable fragments—is the sourcebook for the future. (p. 71)

Freire's insight into the significance of historical awareness is critical; "Freire always viewed historical awareness as an ongoing condition for human betterment, opening up the possibility of a better future" (Macedo, 2018, p 15). Revisiting history is part of the process of conscientization "a deepened consciousness of their situation . . . as an historical reality

susceptible of transformation” (Macedo, 2018, pp. 28-29). Macedo (2018), citing Freire, stated, to understand what is futuristically feasible, one must know where we have come from.

Prior to my doctoral research, I engaged in several lengthy conversations about the role of Chinese intellectuals with professors at Northeast Normal University. Professor Gao pointed out that the starting point for the majority of our conversations was the role of the nation/state. Benedict Anderson (2006) proposed the following definition of the nation: “it is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (pp. 5-6). The idea of an imagined community—like the nation state of China—shares many similarities with Jung’s concept of the collective unconsciousness. Archetypes inhabit the collective imaginary and they reach deeply into each individual’s psyche.

Anderson (2006) asked how an imagined community influenced the minds and actions of people, and what elements of this imagined community would lead generations to willingly and proudly die fighting for the independence of their nation state. I asked similar questions of my research participants; I wanted to gauge how their sense of social responsibility was connected to their imagined community and the effects of national psychology on the psychology of the individual citizen. In my research, I repeatedly witnessed my participants internalize a national identity and sacrifice personal freedom for the collective good. This kind of sacrifice is glorified in a socialist country like China as it represents an elevated social conscience. This type of voluntary sacrifice could also be interpreted as freedom— Fromm (2001) called it “negative freedom” or “escaping from freedom.” In this dissertation, the emphasis is on promoting “positive freedom” (Fromm, 2001).

A Critical Examination of a Colonial Mentality: “Lagging Behind Leaves One Vulnerable to Attacks”

During my senior year in a rural boarding school, I learned that starting in 1840 with the Opium Wars, China endured a decade of humiliation and defeat on the road to modernization. In those days, political/military defeat was generally attributed to an intellectual failure on the part of the Qing dynasty (Rhoads, 2011). History is always written by the winners and the winners, in this case the Western invaders, blamed China for closing its doors to the world. Internalizing this colonial rhetoric, my history textbook stated the Opium Wars opened China’s markets to the world. All Chinese students were taught that China was falling behind, that modernity was passing by, and that the intellectual failure contributed to the nation’s endless military defeats.

China eventually pushed the colonizers out, but the colonial mentality was not easy to erase. You can easily find serials or documentaries about the war between Japan and China, or the civil war between the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) at all hours on Chinese television today. Through televisual repetition and a studied reinforcement of its former national enemy, China has built her collective national identity. The following saying, originally coined by Stalin in the 1950s, is well known in China: “Lagging behind leaves one vulnerable to attacks” (落后就要挨打). Stalin argued this to be the dominant rule of engagement in the world of capitalism (Peng & Tang, 2007). In China, Mao popularized this saying by claiming that with the establishment of the socialist state, China was poised to advance on an institutional level and should therefore focus on economic development (Peng & Tang, 2007). Operating under this logic, Chinese citizens are expected to keep running, often at a furious pace, especially economically, to keep ahead of other countries. Another

signifier of the Chinese national identity is revealed in the lyrics of the Chinese national anthem which is about fighting colonial invaders so as not to be enslaved.

According to Tie-Jun Wen, a famous Chinese economist during the Song and Ming dynasty (which lasted from around the 10th century to the 17th century), China held about 60% of silver in the world, almost all of which was gained from the global silver trade (Wen, 2016, p. 21). China shipped porcelain, silk, and tea to the West, using silver as its primary currency. Frank (1998), a historian, noted silver “went around the world and made the world go round” (p. 131). The silver trade marked the beginning of the global market—“Money and especially silver money was the blood that flowed through its circulatory system and oiled the wheels of production and exchange” (Frank, 1998, p. 132). As a matter of fact, China’s economy was the largest in the world for almost 1,000 years prior to the Opium Wars (Desjardins, 2017; Wen, 2016). It is certainly the case that the Qing government lost two Opium Wars. Perhaps China’s fault was that China invented gunpowder and used it for fireworks instead of guns and canons. China was forced to pay harsh war indemnities to the Western invaders; such punishment contributed to China’s flagging confidence in its own culture and traditions. About 30 years after the Opium Wars, China’s global economic status shifted from a large trade surplus to a debilitating trade deficit (Wen, 2016).

Chinese Modernization: “Defending the Nation’s Cultural Essence with Foreign Means”

In the beginning of the Chapter 1, the aphorism “being in becoming” was posited as a descriptive phrase of how China keeps growing and evolving. You might wonder how we know when we are losing ourselves in the process of evolving. I would argue we are lost when we have to defend our culture, when we lose our confidence in our own culture and our way of educating our people.

In the 1860s, the Qing government and local Chinese governments initiated a “self-strengthening movement” focused on learning Western science and technology that lasted for three decades. In the 1870s, the Qing government sent 120 Chinese children to the United States to learn Western science and engineering (Rhoads, 2011) under the banner of “defending the nation’s cultural essence with foreign means” (Yeh, 1990, p. 1). From this point forward, Chinese modernization coincided with China’s process of westernization.

Since the Qing government was weakened by the colonial wars, some local forces, such as those who fomented the Boxer Rebellion,² initiated a fight against colonial power in China. When the Qing government failed to put down the Boxer rebellion, the Eight-Nation Alliance (composed of Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom) provided military forces and defeated the Boxer Rebellion, which led to the signing of the Boxer Protocol on September 7, 1901 (Hsü, 2000). According to the protocol, 450 million taels (1 tael equals 37.8 grams) of fine silver (around 18,000 tons, worth approximately US \$333 million at the time) were to be paid to the eight victorious nations over the course of 39 years for the damages incurred to foreign lives and property (Spence, 1991, p. 235). Those eight nations knew China would be unable to afford the indemnity. They started to remit some of their indemnity to support Chinese scholars to study in the west and to construct educational institutions in China to teach Western science and democracy. These products and by-products of the colonial intervention led the way to the establishment of the early modern Western-style universities in China.

² The Boxer Rebellion, or Yihetuan Movement (义和拳运动) was an anti-imperialist, anti-foreign, and anti-Christian uprising in Northern China between 1899 and 1901 (toward the end of the Qing dynasty). Because many of the uprising participants practiced Chinese martial arts, the movement was named after the martial art they practiced.

Western-style universities and colleges were built on the ruins of traditional Chinese academies. One landmark of this transformation was the abolition of the civil service examinations in 1905. The civil service examinations, which started in 605 and lasted for 1,300 years, served as the bridge between intellectuals and official government bureaucrats. Those who had the privilege to be educated and selected to serve in official government systems of bureaucracy enjoyed the power exercised by successive Chinese dynasties and were responsible for maintaining and embodying Confucian traditions. Confucian scholars could be found at different levels of the government and served as moral exemplars by bringing equilibrium to a complex hierarchical society (Huang, 1982).

The abolition of the civil service examination resulted in a radical disjuncture between intellectuals and the power of the state (Yeh, 1990). Simultaneously, the Confucian knowledge tradition was challenged by Western scientific knowledge. The abolition of the civil service examination disabled the Chinese moral tradition, because various levels of government officials, as moral exemplars to the society, were Confucian scholars came out of civil service examination. Intellectuals in modern-day China do not shoulder these social responsibilities of taking positions of government officials and becoming the moral exemplars. In 1912—the Xinhai Revolution ended the dynasty system and started early republican era—the dynastic system the Confucian knowledge tradition and its moral tradition had supported, came to an abrupt end.

The tension between the Chinese moral tradition and modernity can be seen in the teaching practices in today's Chinese university. Chinese intellectuals continue to study western knowledge. In so doing, they limit the contribution of the teachings of Confucius to their disciplinary tradition. The modernization of Chinese education is in many respects equivalent to

westernizing Chinese education—modernization is a code for western. Importing Western knowledge has become a process of transplantation rather than a process of localization or reinvention (Yu, 2014).

Western influences have served what Norris (1989) called a “coauthor” role in the creation of Chinese modern universities. Some Chinese higher education researchers find it difficult to “come out with anything of real substance about how Chinese universities differ from or can be different from their Western counterparts, both conceptually and practically” (Yang, 2015, p. 530). The inability to articulate the fundamental differences between Chinese and Western universities and the clear awareness of the need for a Chinese identity are familiar scenarios among many East Asian countries (Jaschik, 2011; Yang, 2015).

The challenges of reconciling Western influences with Chinese values has been a persistent dilemma since the establishment of Chinese modern universities that has taken different forms depending on the historical and social period (Hayhoe, 2005). In a report by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), China’s education minister, Yuan Guiren, argued that universities should maintain political integrity and keep criticism of China’s leaders and political system out of the classroom (Hatton, 2015). Chinese President Xi called for greater ideological supervision in universities, urging authorities to step up the party’s “leadership and guidance” and “improve the ideological and political work” (Hatton, 2015, para, 13).

In China, ideological control always goes hand-in-hand with the prevention of Western ideological penetrations. Both Western knowledge and values and the Chinese nation state can be seen as seeking control over each other and reducing the ability of Chinese education to serve as a tool for social change. One way to transcend the banking approach in classroom teaching in Chinese Normal Universities and encourage more critical engagement with accepted ideas and

practices embedded within the official Chinese curriculum would be to employ arts and performance-based teaching practices—as a tributary of critical pedagogy—such as Theater of the Oppressed (Boal, 1979), improvisation (Johnstone, 1987; Spolin, 1999), and playbuilding (Norris, 2009).

Sustainability of a Newly Established Student Agency

Many of us look to role models to help us discover our potential, possibility, and responsibilities in life. Noam Chomsky is one of my heroes. In one of my doctoral classes, we read two of Noam Chomsky's books, *Manufacturing Consent* and *Who Rules the World?* Chomsky (2016) offered a critical exegesis on the trajectories of public intellectuals which he contrasted with global tendency toward depoliticization. I identify as an intellectual and seek to be the kind of public intellectual Chomsky described—one who engages in the world to make the world a better place through building a socialist alternative to capitalism, to enact on the principles of social justice, to fight inequality, to expose lies, and to tell the truth.

One of my research goals is to develop theatrical strategies to assist young Chinese intellectuals to critically engage with the taken-for-granted world in which they live, primarily in the context of the Chinese Normal University. To achieve that goal requires reviewing the kind of roles Chinese young intellectuals have played in the past.

Chinese students learned to be critical through the ideology of democracy in the West despite the broader context of colonization through Western ideology and knowledge systems on the Chinese university system and the Chinese students who studied overseas. In the 1870s, the first group of Chinese students to study in the United States (120 children whose average age was 12 years old) learned Western science and Western democracy (Rhoads, 2011). As a result, the 1919 May Fourth Movement (an anti-imperialist, cultural, and political movement initiated

by students) showcased the power of educated youth—many of them had overseas study experiences and were radicalized by Western ideology. The political objectives of the May Fourth Movement were imperative to China's integrity. Some of the movement's slogans included "struggle for the sovereignty externally," "get rid of the national traitors at home," and "don't sign the Versailles Treaty."

Compared to the Confucian scholars who emerged through the civil service examinations, the May Fourth Movement students did not expect the state to grant them power. Rather, they discovered power and agency within themselves, established more independent political views, and voluntarily committed themselves to the struggle of saving China from Western imperialism and its feeble government (Yeh, 1990). Questions about how far they could go with their efforts and how long this newly established individual agency could be sustained on Chinese soil arose. Dr. Yeh (1990) stated "a sense of estrangement or alienation among young scholars and students arose soon after the revolution in the 1930s" (p. 51).

To learn what happened to those young radicals and where they situated themselves, we need to first examine the different types of Chinese universities during the 1920s and 1930s. Mao used to say, "When the situation is chaotic, it's the best time to initiate changes" (天下大乱，形势大好). From 1911 to 1927, there was no central government in China. Universities at that time, were funded by different entities with different cultural and political agendas. Yeh (1990) stated that, before the rise of the Nationalists, private educational enterprises in Shanghai experienced years of efflorescence in a laissez-faire environment. The total number of colleges and universities in China, located primarily in Beijing and Shanghai, where 60% of all college students resided, grew from 11 in 1920 to 59 in 1930 (Yeh, 1990, p. 170).

When talking about the culture and politics on the university campuses in Republican China, Yeh (1990) identified four major types of universities and colleges, based on different funding sources, state-sponsored universities, Western missionary colleges, private colleges, and government-sponsored institutions.

State-sponsored universities, created under the Qing government, included institutions like Beijing (or Peking) University.³ Though, Beijing University grew out of the former Imperial Academy of the Qing government, it led to the establishment of the iconoclastic new culture movement. The new culture movement, which advocated democracy and science, was part of the May Fourth Movement. Students at Beijing University led revolts against Confucianism, against Chinese traditions, and advocated vernacular literature and also stood up for China during periods of national crisis. In this sense, the May Fourth Movement disassociated nationalism from traditional Chinese cultural heritage.

Western (usually American) missionary colleges, such as St. John's University in Shanghai, began as an American Episcopalian school and was highly connected to the "comprador bourgeoisie" of the treaty port. The comprador bourgeoisie included the Chinese middle class allied with foreign investors, multi-national corporations, bankers, and sometimes the military while the treaty port belonged to port cities first established by the British in China at the conclusion of the First Opium War by the Treaty of Nanking in 1842. According to Yeh (1990), the distinction between "national" and "comprador" bourgeoisie was an attempt to highlight their different political attitudes toward the imperialist powers, which was essentially an analysis from the Chinese Communist Party's perspective of class interest. Students at St. John's—who were primarily from upper- to middle-class families—enjoyed a web of social

³ Beijing University was funded by the ministry of Education. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported Tsinghua University. The Ministry of Communication also had its own universities (Yeh, 2012).

relationships with the top echelon of the financial, commercial, industrial, and professional elites of Shanghai. They learned the manners and styles of the West (Yeh, 1990). The principle form of Chinese-language instruction at St. John's included a translation of English classics (Yeh, 1990). For this reason, St. John's students were criticized for their illiteracy in native Chinese culture and language (p. 79). In 1952, St. John's was closed in mainland China by the Chinese Communist Party. Today, it is part of The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Private Chinese colleges, such as Fudan University, were founded at the turn of the century by Jiangnan⁴ gentry and bureaucratic reformers. These private colleges sponsored a joint gentry-official network. Their student bodies were less well-to-do, compared to the students at St. John's. Due to connections with the urban reformist elites and some famous constitutionalists, including Yan Fu, Liang Qichao, Ma Liang, and Cai Yuanpei, Fudan students had the opportunity to study a variety of subjects including Western political thought and social Darwinism. Those courses functioned as forums for highly politicized discussions on current affairs and social problems. According to Yeh (1990), many private Chinese colleges at the time initiated political protests and reflected serious intellectual discontent. Unlike the Western missionary colleges, where English was emphasized at the expense of Chinese, Fudan threatened its students with expulsion should anyone be found guilty of "deprecating the national learning" (Yeh, 1990, p. 104).

Nanyang College, another private college, was funded by local government officials. Students at Nanyang were more academically serious students than the students at Fudan, who were more interested in social mobility. Nanyang students had to demonstrate their diligence and competence in academic work to become technocrats. In contrast, the sons and daughters of the

⁴ Jiang Nan means south of the Yangtze River, adjacent to the Shanghai area

comprador bourgeois at St. John's had their family social privilege to fall back on to achieve their positions as financiers and industrialists.

Government-sponsored institutions, supported by the Nationalist Party or Kuomintang (KMT), included Zhongshan University in Guangzhou, which was established by the nationalist party in the mid-1920s. Zhongshan combined political training with a heavy emphasis on science and technology. Yeh (1990) described the nationalist party's role in colleges like Zhongshan, which resemble the role the party plays currently in the Chinese university.

In Shanghai and Beijing, the pressure to build “a culture of the Three Principles of the People” for the whole nation changed the appearance of college campuses and induced gestures of student compliance. Rules and regulations handed down by the Party abounded. College students were required to familiarize themselves with the Three Principles of the People. Social science courses were devoted to proving the infallibility of the Three Principles—much as later, under a different regime, college students would be demonstrating the unassailable truth of scientific socialism. (p. 177)

The three principles became slogans for the Sun Zhongshan (the father of the Nationalist Party)'s revolutionary student group, the United League. The first principle, *minzu zhuyi*, or nationalism, represented opposition to foreign imperialism. It later shifted to emphasize self-determination of the Chinese people, including minority groups. The second principle, *minquan*, referred to the rights of the people, and was sometimes interpreted to mean democracy, which sought to balance government power through devices such as elections and political reforms. The third principle, *minsheng*, or people's livelihood, was concerned with the equalization of land ownership or socialism. These principles played an important role in the 1911 Republican

Revolution. In 1922, they were solidified when the Nationalists formed an alliance with the Chinese Communist Party.

Throughout the 1920s, the young Communist Party started their own universities to spread their political agenda and foster their own political and military leaders. The three principles initiated by Nationalist Party became the four compulsory modules of political thought also known as the four treasures. These four treasures—the Fundamentals of Marxism, Maoism and Chinese Characteristic Socialism, the Outline of Modern Chinese History, and Moral Thoughts, Legal and Civic Education—must be taken by all Chinese undergraduate students to advance Chinese students' cultural and political values. According to some scholars (Zhang, 2017), these four treasures have become one of the main obstacles preventing students from thinking critically. Students attending government-sponsored institutions are expected to study and memorize the three principles and the four treasures and are repeatedly tested on these principles in middle school, high school, and throughout their university education including the PhD. Doctoral candidates have to memorize party propaganda to pass their entrance exams. While all students in China can recount some Marxist theory, Marxist theory is not used as a tool to analyze daily conditions but instead is dogma students must memorize.

In the 1920s and 1930s, there were more private universities, there was no central government, and the university students back then were more politically active. There might be some correlations there. According to Yeh (1990), the financial state of Fudan and other private colleges was not very stable leading some colleges to become more commercialized or make compromises when facing state control. This was especially true after the founding of the Nanjing government in 1927, the first central political order established after the fall of the Qing Imperial Government in 1911.

The government of the Nanjing Republic gave the Minister of Education power to regulate the educational system, which included enforcing the secular nature of education and legitimizing school policies and institutional practices. Under the Nanjing Republic, students were now forbidden to participate in political elections. The Chinese educational system adopted elements of the American and Japanese educational systems, including following a 6-3-3-4 timeline, 6 years in elementary school, 3 years in middle school, 3 years in high school, and 4 years in college. As a result, students were now treated and organized as a school-age population. Yeh (2015) interpreted the adoption of the modern educational system with its school-age timeline as a convenient way to regulate and control students' bodies and minds through compulsory attendance.

During the era of the civil service examination, education was not compulsory; participation in the educational system was a personal choice. The traditional Chinese academy had been a place to worship respected ancestors. Under the new educational system, learners in schools were defined as knowledge collectors (知识人), instead of cultural and moral inheritors (文化人或道德楷模) (Yeh, 2015, p. 36).

The new educational system, like the self-expansionary market-driven economic system with its profit-oriented modes of accumulation and pre-established expropriation, put everyone in a huge machine of distribution and consumption under the social and metabolic control of capital. Each person now worked according to the standardized time and criteria and became part of the assembly line (Yeh, 2015). Chinese daily life began to resemble Willy Loman's meaningless life in Arthur Miller's famous stage play, *Death of a Salesman*. The decline of private higher institutions coupled with the increase in state control and a market-driven system turned student activists into knowledge collectors, full on information but low on meaning.

A Brief History of Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy has many antecedents. These include the human potential movement of the 1960s, highlighted the work of psychologists Maslow (1970) and Rogers (1961, 1969), the work of liberal progressive educators like Kozol (2013) and Kohl (1988), Marxist economists like Bowles and Gintis (2011), popular education that grew out of base communities in Latin America (organized by Catholic workers and radical priests), the work of philosophers like Maxine Greene (1978, 1988, 1995), and the work of Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire (2001, 2003). Many Freirean educators took an interest in the work of German philosophers known collectively as the Frankfurt School, philosophers such as Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse who had escaped Nazi Germany. The collective work of these philosophers became known as “critical theory” (McLaren, 2016). This framework has been used to examine the ways educational, social, and political systems are embedded in historical injustices that disproportionately affect the poor and people of color.

The civil rights movement and the activism of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, as well as different waves of feminist movements, have influenced many critical pedagogues. Critical educators like Henry Giroux and Donaldo Macedo became early American experts on Freire. Macedo, originally from Cape Verde in Africa, focused primarily on colonialism and its effect on language (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Macedo, Dendrinos, & Gounari, 2016). Giroux focused on Freire’s radical politics (Giroux, 1988a, 1988b) and its potential for transforming teacher education in the United States. Giroux later turned his attention to postmodernism (Giroux & Aronowitz, 1991) and the study of youth culture in contemporary political situations (Giroux, 2013).

Second generation critical educators like Peter McLaren focused on postmodern politics (McLaren, 1994) and then shifted his focus to the work of Karl Marx and other Marxists (McLaren, 2015). McLaren named his new approach revolutionary critical pedagogy which was designed to criticize the limitations of identity politics, including critical race theory, and focus more on the class struggle as the root of society's problems. Revolutionary critical pedagogy criticizes entrepreneurial individuality that tries to locate voice and agency outside of the history of class struggle. As critical pedagogy evolved, it began to address questions of multiculturalism and race. Bell hooks (1994) and Antonia Darder became prominent voices within the critical pedagogy movement. Both of these theorists addressed the transformation of the White supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Darder (2002, 2016), who wrote as a Marxist, developed a pedagogical praxis inspired by Freire and guided by the revolutionary knowledge of historical materialism. Marxist feminist critical educators such as Antonia Darder and Lilia Monzó (Monzó & McLaren, 2014; Monzó, 2015) connected questions of patriarchal and sexist ideology to the material origins of social labor that emphasize the relations between the sexes. Marxist feminist educators also examined how the distribution of labor in capitalist economies produced the alienating conditions in which men and women relate to themselves and to one another (Ebert & Zavarzadeh, 2008).

Critical pedagogy is an approach to thinking critically about the relationship between the self and the larger society. Critical pedagogy has many tributaries in the field of education including arts-based education (Doyle, 1993; Greene, 1988, 1995), ecopedagogy (Kahn, 2010), critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998), critical ethnography (McLaren, 1999), critical multiculturalism (Colón-Muñiz, SooHoo, & Brignoni, 2010), critical literacy (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993), culturally responsive teaching and methodology (Berryman et al., 2013; Smith,

2012), decolonial pedagogy (Smith, 2012), and others that flow from its central aim of transforming conditions of oppression into a politics and practice of liberation. It is more accurate to say there are many critical pedagogies instead of one critical pedagogy.

The overarching aim of critical pedagogy is to create conditions where oppressed and nonoppressed groups can recognize the roles they play in each other's worlds, either as passive subjects who have been turned into objects (the oppressed), or as subjects who are complicit in creating oppressive conditions for others (oppressors). It is possible to simultaneously be oppressed and oppress others.

Critical pedagogy examines conflict situations through critical reflection and dialogue, guided by a teacher who speaks with authority but is not authoritarian. McLaren's development of revolutionary critical pedagogy (McLaren, 1999, 2015) introduced Marxist/Hegelian dialectics in the development of a philosophy of praxis that can point to creating a social universe outside of value production. Revolutionary critical pedagogy seeks to create a world where value production (the accumulation of profits by wage labor) no longer organizes society and instead a world where men and women can practice what Marx called "freely associated labor." While there is no blueprint yet for an alternative to capitalism, there are useful ideas that can be learned from a wide range of both Western and indigenous thinkers (McLaren, 2015). McLaren, Kirylo, Freire, and Dantley introduced liberation theology into the field of critical pedagogy (McLaren & SooHoo, 2018).

Critical pedagogy is about love and rage. It is passionate love toward the realization of everybody's humanization and outrage toward the existence of unjust and dehumanizing relationships. Revolutionary love is at play when we break with the logic of commodification in capitalist society. It is an insurgent force that can help us resist racism, sexism, homophobia, and

capitalist exploitation by helping us find different forms of human relationality (McLaren, 2015). The best way to realize full humanization, according to critical educators, is through nonviolent means (McLaren, 2015).

Freire's concept of consciousness-raising (*conscientização*) is directed to recognizing or uncovering the social and political contradictions of everyday life, and subsequently transforming the oppressive elements of our sociopolitical reality. This process helps us discover ourselves in the process of becoming more fully human. Critical consciousness or *conscientização* requires the individual to become more fully conscious of her own social context, political context, economic context, gender, social class, sexuality, and race; these lived contexts can help the student understand how they have helped to form her reality and produced her taken-for-granted assumptions. The concept of *conscientização* stipulates that the critical educator creates the conditions of possibility through which her students can realize their own agential power or protagonistic agency. This is facilitated by helping students come to the realization that the consequences of their choices help shape their personal history and the conditions that inform society at large. Participants in critical pedagogy are able to see themselves as active participants in history rather than passive consequences of abstract historical forces. The destinies of students come to be seen as held at least in part in the students' own hands.

Critical pedagogy is a path toward critical consciousness, but it is not a step-by-step methodology (Bartolome, 1994; Macedo, 1997). It develops out of dialogue among students and teachers that begins with understanding the experiences students bring from their daily lives—as a student in a university setting, a citizen in a society, and a human being in this universe (Shor, 1992). As human beings, we have to think and act critically; otherwise, we will continue to

contribute to the changes of the world by indirectly supporting the dominant forces (SooHoo, 2004). For Freire (1998), dialogism was a means by which students could become actively involved in their own education. The student's voice is encouraged through dialogue since the teacher's voice must be limited for the student to participate (Shor, 1992). Freire (1970) wrote dialogue "is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (p. 69). He emphasized "only the dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education" (Freire, 1970, p. 73).

Two Phases of Localizing Critical Pedagogy in a Chinese Context

Critical pedagogy was introduced to the Chinese academic community in the 1980s (Yan, 2007, 2008). There is a growing interest in critical pedagogy and the Western Marxist tradition (such as the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory) among Chinese educators (Xu, 1998, 2000). According to Yan (2008), when a new theory is introduced, a localization process usually occurs in two phases. The first preliminary phase involves the translation, introduction, and production of commentaries on the imported theory within the academic field. The second, more advanced phase occurs when the theory starts to influence policymaking and is used to guide practitioners' work in respective fields. To move from the first to the second phase, a few prerequisites have to be met. Theoretically, the theory has to be capable of explaining Chinese society; in a realistic/practical context, practitioners need to be able to resonate with the theory. The theory cannot be contradictory to the mainstream ideology so that scholars, practitioners, and government officials can work together to localize the theory (Yan, 2008).

The earliest introductions of critical pedagogy in China occurred through the efforts of well-respected Chinese educators who organized translations of the works of Western critical

pedagogues⁵. Many of these Chinese educators also held prestigious administrative positions, were successful scholars, and often government officials. While they introduced and promoted critical pedagogy by translating these works, they seldom mentioned or quoted works of critical pedagogy in their own academic work or public lectures.

Another group of scholars produced research papers on the development of critical pedagogy in the West and different schools of thought within critical pedagogy. My own master's thesis (Wang, 2013) falls under this category. Professor Guang-Cai Yan has written a series of academic articles on the development of critical pedagogy in the West (Yan, 2007) and critical pedagogy in China (Yan, 2008). Yan (2008) put together and categorized some translated works, journal articles, and graduate students' theses and dissertations on critical pedagogy produced since the 1990s.⁶ Yan's categorizations reflect the following features:

⁵ A collection of Apple's works (seven books) were translated and published in Mainland China between 2001 and 2008. The editors of the collection include Yuan, Zhen-Guo (Deputy director of the department of social sciences, Minister of Education), Zhang, Bin-Xian (the former Dean of Department of Education in Beijing Normal University when he was at his 40s), Xu, Hui (Former president of ZheJiang Normal University & the vice chairman of the central committee of the democratic league), and Xie, Wei-He (Vice president of Tsinghua University). Xu, Hui and his team also translated many of Paulo Freire's works. For the past few years, some students and professors in Northeast Normal Universities have translated a few of McLaren's works. Due to the state control on publishing houses, translations of McLaren's books have not yet been published.

⁶ A selection of master's theses or doctoral dissertations written by Chinese graduate students on critical pedagogy or Western critical pedagogues since the year of 2000:

Xin, Z. Y. (2003). *论阿普尔教育理论的批判性* [The criticality in Apple's educational theory] (Master's thesis Southwest China Normal University, Chongqing, China).

Zhong, L. (2005). *教育呼唤批判精神: 批判教育学研究* [Education cultivates critical spirit: A study on critical pedagogy] (Master's thesis, Sichuan University, Chengdu, China).

Zhang, K. (2007). *教育即解放—弗莱雷教育思想研究* [Education is liberation: On Freire's educational thoughts] (Doctoral dissertation, Central China Normal University, Wuhan, China).

Peng, L. (2007). *“公民”与“解放”: 批判教育学两个重要主题研究* [“Citizen” and “liberation”: The most important concept in critical pedagogy] (Master's thesis, Capital Normal University, Beijing, China).

Lian, F. F. (2010). *吉鲁的后现代批判教育学探究* [A research on Giroux's critical post-modern pedagogy] (Master's thesis, Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China).

Ying, J. Q. (2011). *教育中的知识合法性—阿普尔教育哲学思想研究* [Legitimacy of knowledge: A study of Michael Apple's philosophy of education] (Doctoral dissertation, Fudan University, Shanghai, China).

Liu, X. L. (2012). *亨利·吉鲁的教师观研究* [A study on Giroux's theory on teacher] (Shandong Normal University, Jinan, China).

Wang, Y. (2013). *美国批判教育学者麦克拉伦的学术生命研究* [A study on critical educator McLaren's academic life] (Master's thesis, Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China).

1. The research focus has been on a few critical pedagogues and their theory. Examples include Michael Apple and Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of ideology and cultural reproduction theory, Henry Giroux and Paul Willis's theory of resistance, and Peter McLaren's revolutionary critical pedagogy from a Marxist humanist approach.
2. The Chinese scholars who study critical pedagogy are often from the fields of educational theory, curriculum studies, and comparative education. They study critical pedagogy as an academic field and have shared with their Chinese colleagues and audience their understandings of critical pedagogy in the West. They seldom, however, connect critical pedagogy with Chinese educational issues.
3. Comparative education journals published the majority of the studies on critical pedagogy (Yan, 2008).

Yan's (2008) examination of critical pedagogy research in China suggested the localization process of critical pedagogy in China is in the first (preliminary) phase. My research is an attempt to move into the second phase of the localization process by incorporating critical pedagogy in my research.

Li, C. X. (2015). 贝尔·胡克斯的批判课程理论及其启示 [bell hook's critical curriculum theory and its implications] (Master's thesis, Southwest University, Chongqing, China).

Qi, D. F. (2015). 吉鲁批判教育哲学思想研究 [A study on Giroux's critical philosophy of education] (Doctoral dissertation, Shanxi University, Taiyuan, China).

Liu, X. L. (2015). 论批判教育学的课程知识选择 [The curriculum knowledge selection in critical pedagogy] (Master's thesis, Shanxi University, Taiyuan, China).

Zhang, Z. Y. (2016). 批判教育学在中国的传播及其影响 [The propagation and influence of critical pedagogy in China] (Master's thesis, Shanxi University, Taiyuan, China).

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Ideological (in)Compatibility Between Critical Pedagogy and China

Some of the critical pedagogues in the West self-identify as being on the political left or militant far left, which could benefit critical pedagogy among some Chinese scholars even though, in the Chinese context, leftist or neo-leftist scholars could mean something quite different than it does in the West (Du, 2014; Mishra, 2006; Yan, 2008). If we are to consider critical pedagogy a leftist educational trend, we need to briefly look at the history of the left in China.

A History of Anti-Rightist Movements: As a radical leader, Chairman Mao was able to turn his critical theory into practice across China. By 1956, China had officially completed the socialist transformation of capitalist ownership—the capitalist and landowner social classes were abolished. As a result, some of the Western Marxist discourses, such as class analysis, can hardly find significance in the Chinese context. Chinese researchers have often avoided the use of sensitive terms or perspectives, like social class, when conducting their research (Yan, 2008).

For Chairman Mao, capitalist ideology, the privileged attitude of the bourgeoisie, and bureaucratism could still threaten the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party. After Chairman Mao's establishment as China's leader, there were fractious years of anti-rightist movements and 10 years of cultural revolution which turned schools into agonistic birthplaces of political movements and took away the dignity and freedom of expression of many intellectuals by accusing them of being counterrevolutionaries. In many cases, this led to loss of physical freedom and even death. Chinese history, from the establishment of the People's Republic of China to the end of 1970s, represents a modern history of political movements, with almost each movement embracing a leftist philosophy (Yan, 2008). When looking back at that era, people are

often more cautious with and even more fearful of leftist political trends than of trends on the right.

Toward the end of the 1970s, Deng Xiaoping initiated massive Chinese economic reforms making economic development the country's central task. Politically, the Chinese government started to clear up the historical confusions surrounding the Cultural Revolution and rectify all reversals of right and wrong enacted by the Red Guards under the auspices of the Chinese Communist Party. Under these economic and political circumstances, Western cultural trends and schools of thought were cautiously reintroduced to Chinese society. In 1979, People's Education Press reprinted a 1964 book titled *Selected works on Western capitalist educational theory*. More traditional schools of thought, reflected by such works as Herbart and Pestalozzi's theory on pedagogy and educational psychology, Dewey and Kilpatrick's pragmatism, and Bruner and Bloom's curriculum theory were favored (Yan, 2008). Even though China professes to support a Marxist and socialist ideology, Western Marxism was considered a capitalist ideology until the 1980s (Du, 2014). In the 1990s, more translated works and research on Western schools of thought and theory proliferated China. The ideological criticism associated with the word capitalist during the days of Mao faded and Western discourses started to dominate the field of social science. During this time, critical pedagogy was introduced to China (Yan, 2008).

Social Structural Differentiation and Cultural Shifts: From the 1990s onwards, while Chinese society changed dramatically, the rhetoric of the mainstream ideology remained constant. Economically, the accumulation of wealth and economic development stood as the axial concerns of the country (Lu, 2002). The Chinese economy benefitted tremendously from pragmatic politics and marketization. Meanwhile, a series of social structural issues emerged

including a large economic gap between cities (especially coastal cities) and countryside and an increasing gap between the rich and the poor. In 2001, a government research institute, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, published an official report on social structures in contemporary China (Lu, 2002). The research team illustrated the 10 social strata using Max Weber's three-component theory of stratification, and adopted the idea of careers as the basic distinction of the categorization, with three standards of measurement: power resources (the government or party power to allocate social resources), economic resources (salary), and cultural resources (educational background and academic diploma; Lu, 2002). The report showed the existence of inequality in the process of Chinese economic reforms. Chinese social structures had shifted dramatically since 1949—from a celebration of radical egalitarianism to a recognition of the existence social strata (economic inequality); from a government directive calling for the suppression of personal desires to a national embrace of a culture of consumption and individual pleasure seeking (Yan, 2008). Dramatic changes happened economically, culturally, and psychologically. Chinese thinkers in and outside of academia started to reflect on the Chinese reforms. In this process of reflection, two not mutually exclusive groups within the Chinese intellectual world formed—the new right and the new left.⁷

The new left blames privatization and the collusion between the market (or the capitalists) and the privileged class (or power) for the expanding gap between the rich and the poor; they critique the globalization of capitalism and the capitalist culture of consumption, advocate equality and social justice, and stand against the existence of the so-called free market (Xiao, 2003). The new left uses Western Marxism and postmodern theory as their theoretical resources, such as Foucault and Derrida's poststructuralism, Gramsci's hegemony theory, Said's

⁷ The "right" and "left" labels represent Chinese intellectuals' macro positions to explain history, examine reality, and resolve social problems. Not all Chinese scholars apply these macro positions in their research.

postcolonial theory, Habermas's theory of communicative action, and Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory (Xu, 1998; Yan, 2008).

The new right is also referred to as the liberals in China. The new right scholars from the fields of economy and politics hold the position that inequality in China has little to do with the market itself, but instead with the existence of an imperfect market environment (Yan, 2008). They suggest deepening reforms within the political system and supporting the Western neoliberal market approach. They support small government, individual freedom, and human rights. In contrast to the right in the West, they have little interest in preserving Chinese traditional culture or ideology (Yan, 2008).

Both the right and left agree on the relationship between the privileged class and social injustice. Neither is against social reforms or democracy. The right advocates using the Western free market to create less inequality whereas the left values Chinese traditions and economic equality among people. Even though the Chinese left is not comparable with the left in the Western context, they remain the biggest promoters of Western Marxism and critical pedagogy (Yan, 2008).

Chinese Critical Traditions and Grassroots Activities

In the name of localization, some Chinese philosophers and practitioners experimented on social reforms using local resources. In the first part of the 20th century, rural reconstruction movements in China led by some Chinese intellectuals represented a local critical tradition. Leaders of the rural reconstruction movements, such as Shuming Liang⁸ (1893-1988) and

⁸ Shuming Liang (梁漱溟, 1893-1988) a leader in the Rural Reconstruction Movement. Between the years of 1931 and 1937, Liang was instructing the rural reconstruction in Zouping County of the Shandong Province.

Yangchu Yan⁹ (or Y. C. James Yen, 1890-1990), were simultaneously philosophers, educators, and practitioners.

Grassroots activities in school settings represent students' and teachers' agency and their ability to critically engage in transforming the teaching and learning environment. *Fire-stealer* (Deng, 2013), a 2013 10-episode documentary on Chinese grassroots education reforms, highlights teacher practitioners and higher education scholars who were keen on education reforms. These practitioners and scholars are both part of and products of the Chinese education system. They realized the limitations of government top-down education reforms and choose to be an alternative force for improving the Chinese education system for children.

The grassroots reformers were faced with the task of determining to what extent you can criticize your education system or nation without being outlawed, marginalized or called a traitor. In the documentary, Deng (2013) stated that government-initiated education reforms and grassroots education reforms should complement each other, not oppose each other.

Norris' Playbuilding and a Summary of the Modern Educational Drama

Canadian Professor Joe Norris (2009) made it clear to practitioners of arts-based research that his version of playbuilding was not a fixed or prescriptive story; but was meant to be more fluid. Norris' description of playbuilding was based on his experiences working with his team at

⁹ Yangchu Yan (晏阳初, English name Y. C. James Yen, 1890 -1990) was famous for conducting mass literacy and rural reconstruction, first in China, then in many countries. As a volunteer during World War I, Yen taught Chinese laborers (coolies) in France the Chinese language. In the 1920s, Yen organized the National Association of Mass Education Movements to bring literacy to the Chinese masses. In 1929, he chose Ding Xian (a county in Hebei) to start his rural reconstruction experiment. In 1948, Yen was instrumental in lobbying and founding the Sino-American Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction (JCRR). The American Congress included a provision in the China Aid Act of 1948 to locate one tenth of the fund to Yen's experiment in the rural reconstruction movement. The JCRR was governed by five commissioners; Yen was one of the three Chinese commissioners. In 1950s and 1960s, he established the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction and organized the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement.

Mirror Theatre. Readers are encouraged to “shape its contents into approaches unique to their particular contexts” (Norris, 2009, p. 65).

Norris’ playbuilding (or Norris’ Mirror Theatre team) incorporates various theatrical traditions in the process of making plays, including improvisation (Johnstone, 1987; Spolin, 1999), theatre-in-education (TIE) literature (Jackson, 1993), Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1979, 1995), and collective creation (the Canadian name for playbuilding; Berry & Reinbold, 1985; Bray, 1991; Weigler, 2001). Improvisation, theatre-in-education, and theatre of the oppressed have been incorporated into the modern educational drama movement since the beginning of the 20th century. The key tenants of playbuilding as an art-based research methodology were described in Chapter 1. In this part of my literature review I elaborate on the development of modern educational drama.

At the beginning of the 20th century, modern educational drama was born in British and North American society (Courtney, 1989). The progressive education movement of the 1930s greatly influenced the development of drama in the classroom and the adoption of theatre in children’s learning, with an emphasis on learning by doing and dramatic doing (Cook, 1917; Dewey, 1913). Rousseau’s (1799) inspiring concern in *Emile* led educators to see a child as a child: “They are always seeking the man in the child without thinking of what he is before being a man” (p. 34). Dewey’s catch phrase of “learning by doing” was popularly realized through dramatic activities in various experimental schools (Courtney, 1968). Children’s psychology was incorporated into child drama by Slade (1973) to emphasize the importance of drama in children’s self and personality development.

In the 1970s, the idea of drama as a teaching/learning medium, represented by Heathcote and Bolton, became more popular. They advocated “live through” experiences in the “here and

now” instead of re-playing old experiences. They focused primarily on children’s social ability to experience and to create. Bolton (1998) argued for a reformation of classroom acting behaviors and embraced diverse kinds of acting behaviors from improvisation to staged plays.

Another English pioneer in children’s drama, Way (1967), regarded school as more of a place to nurture students than a place to train professional actors. Way suggested the function of drama is to help shape children’s personalities and behaviors through improvisational exercises—such as rethinking and reimagining everyday social life and everyday lived experiences in the process of playing and playmaking.

Around the same time, improvisation based on the methods of Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone started to gain popularity all over the world. Their theatre games became the backbone of drama in the classroom (Courtney, 1989). In the 1970s, Augusto Boal’s theatre of the oppressed started to be widely used to deal with social and political issues. Practitioners in school settings who occupy the field of theatre/drama have created a variety of forms and conceptual approaches to educational drama, including dramatic teaching method (Finlay-Johnson, 1911), drama in classroom (Bolton, 1998), developmental drama (Courtney, 1990), creative drama (Slade, 1973; Ward, 1930), theatre-in-education (Jackson, 1993; Way, 1967), drama-in-education (Hornbrook, 1998a, 1998b), process drama (Neelands, 1984; O’Neill, 1995; O’Toole, 1992), and improvisation (Johnstone, 1987; Spolin, 1999).

Drama as a Teaching/Learning Method/Medium

English elementary school teacher Finlay-Johnson (1911) regarded drama as a tool that creates the conditions of possibility for children to study other subject-matter in school. Cook (1917) stressed the importance of both playing and the method of playing in the classroom in *The Play Way*. In his book, Cook (1917) touched upon the essence of the dramatic method, including

agency, student voice, and collective creation. Courtney (1968) categorized three principles that serve as the foundation of Cook's dramatic method of play:

1. Proficiency and learning come not from reading and listening but from action, from doing, and from experience.
2. Good work is more often the result of spontaneous effort and free interest than of compulsion and forced application.
3. The natural means of study in youth is play. (p. 44)

Some of Heathcote's famous contributions to educational drama include: the creating of a "make-believe" environment and the importance of "teacher-in-role." The first thing Heathcote would do when getting a drama started is to build belief. She has to believe. So do her students. She does not use terms like "Pretend with me..." or "Lets fantasize..." or "Can you imagine...?" (Wagner, 1976, p. 67). She directly tells the group what she believes about in an agreed-upon circumstance, which includes attention to space, time, characters, problems, personalities, and relationships. She makes sure that no student in the classroom is distracted by disbelief of the agreed-upon circumstance. Following this, students and the teacher engage in the challenge of improvising the story with genuine feeling and enthusiasm (Wagner, 1976). Without a "make-believe" environment, drama cannot work as an efficient medium for learning.

(2) Teacher-in-role is one of Heathcote's most famous and effective teaching ploys (Wagner, 1976). The teacher goes into the role to set up and heighten the emotion needed for the story/context. The intense and sometimes aggressive emotions created by the teacher forms a make-believe environment that facilitates student involvement such that they are able to experience their roles as naturally belonging to them. A BBC TV special program (Smedley, 1971) famously documented Heathcote's teaching practices. In the video, Heathcote

convincingly stated, “if a teacher puts tension there, the rest follows it.” When it is the time to reflect on the story or “role work”, the teacher comes out of character to create the needed distance and objectivity for the reflective activities.

(3) A dramatic methodology’s educational purpose is deeply rooted in its ability to steer people to “seeing something significant” through contemplating that singular moment of existence (Bolton & Heathcote, 1999, p. ix). The emergent meaning lies neither in the actor nor the character, but in the context in that moment of which the actor and the character comprise an integral part. Role play (or role work) is about collectively living through that moment of meaning-making (Bolton & Heathcote, 1999). Heathcote’s practice was described as “living-through” drama (O’Neill, 2014, p. 3).

Heathcote also worked with children with special needs (Smedley, 1971). In the same BBC TV special mentioned earlier, Heathcote approached a group of children with special needs with the assumption they had experienced vigilant supervision and control for most of their lives. In her drama workshop, Heathcote asked those children to physically roll their caretakers/teachers from one side of the classroom to the other side. The teachers acquiesced and the children rolled their teachers from one end of the room to the other, so that their teachers were left clumped together on the floor at one end of the room. Heathcote then asked the children to carefully observe their teachers lying in a pile on the floor. She asked the children to pull down their teachers’ extended arms and legs. What was happening was a classic case of role reversal. The roles of the controlling teachers were exchanged with the role of the compliant children. The children were given the opportunity to experience power and the teachers experienced what it was like to be controlled, managed, and even manipulated. One teacher stated his autistic boy was always a bit distant with him rarely interacting but found the moment

the boy decided to roll his teacher, a genuinely different connection that involved feelings of trust was forged.

Debates on “Drama in Education”

John Hodgson and Martin Banham collected the most salient thoughts and practices of Dorothy Heathcote and others who viewed drama as a unique and important educational instrument which they termed drama in education (DIE; Banham & Hodgson, 1972, 1973, 1975). David Hornbrook critiqued the idea of solely or mainly using drama as a teaching/learning medium. He advocated the idea of drama-in-education as a rigorous subject in itself rather than instrumentalizing drama by limiting it to a teaching tool or learning medium (Hornbrook, 1998a, 1998b). Hornbrook was committed to the idea that young people should be learning *about* drama, as much as learning *through* drama (1998a, p. ix). Hornbrook’s concerns were supported by Britain’s National Curriculum requirement at the time, which emphasized the acquisition of drama skills and knowledge.

Creative Drama and Children’s Theatre

In the 1930s, Ward founded the field of creative drama and children’s theatre in the United States. Ward (1930) argued creative drama in the classroom does not focus on the content of artistic representation, but rather emphasizes the opportunity for children to improvise and be creative in the classroom. Ward’s creative drama in the classroom opposed memorizing scripts and encouraged students to improvise and create their own drama using storytelling and imagination for the interpretive purpose of understanding themselves in relationship to the surrounding society. It prepared students to actively participate as agential members of a democratic society, opening up agential conditions of possibility and of imagined consequences of our actions.

In 1950s, Slade (1973) founded Child Drama in England. Slade's (1973) child drama was not created for theatrically talented children but instead for "children everywhere particularly the unhappy ones" (p. 17). Slade separated dramatic play (or "drama as part of life") from professional theatrical performance (or "theatre as an art form"), emphasizing children's free and creative expression for happiness-development. By introducing children's psychology into the field, Slade became one of the early supporters of drama-therapy in England (Brian Way's introduction to Slade's book, 1973).

In the 1960s, Courtney (1968) advocated developmental drama and referred to dramatic studies/education as a concept that goes "beyond literature, beyond Drama,¹⁰ and beyond the dual emphasis of practice and theory. It has become an all-embracing concept covering the whole growth of man—as an infant, as a school-child, as a student, and as part of the very process of living" (p. v).

Process Drama

Process drama uses improvisation with conditions "because an exercise that is spontaneous will not necessarily mean that it is capable of generating a dramatic world" (O'Neill, 1995, p. 10). A dramatic world or a deeper understanding of the world of play will emerge, "if the director skillfully sets up situations for the actors to explore and provides a secure framework for the improvised activities" (O'Neill, 1995, p. 11). O'Neill (1995) described "process drama" as:

Process drama is a complex dramatic encounter. Like other theatre events it evokes an immediate dramatic world bounded in space and time, a world that depends on the consensus of all those present for its existence. Process drama proceeds without a script,

¹⁰ In the original text, the word "Drama" is with a capitalized "D."

its outcome is unpredictable, it lacks a separate audience, and the experience is impossible to replicate exactly. (p. xiii)

Neelands (2000) created a diagram to identify the behavioral “frames” that can help drama teachers (or directors) diagnose what has happened in the complex encounter of a dramatic event. Both O’Neill (1995) and Neelands (2000) argued, to improvise meaningful activities, we have to frame the “free” activities first. From the periphery to the center, there are five layers to Neelands’ frames: contract, given circumstances, convention, knowledge and experience, and personal boundaries.

Like in a game, a contract is necessary for students and teachers to be clear on what is and is not allowed to create a safe space for everybody. Given circumstances might generate a play, a text, a pretext, characters, relationships, or a historical context. Conventions are the “means” that are employed to realize the given circumstances. Different conventions/means/forms provide students with different experiences of form and content. Students might not be allowed to talk, or they might need to engage in different body contact with others when they want to talk. Students’ existing knowledge and experience either assists or limits their ability to manage other frames appropriately. Our personal physical, cultural, psychological boundaries are important issues to be taken into consideration.

For Neelands (2000), the heart of drama is “tempering the planned with the live(d)” (para. 33). One of the ways to temper the planned is through “pretexts” (O’Neill, 1995). Classic plays, myth, legend, and folktale like *Romeo and Juliet* for Bernstein’s *West Side Story* can be used as pretexts for dramatists to rework on (O’Neill, 1995). Sometimes, directors rehearse a previously existing script to improvise parallel, alternative stories, and generate significant dramatic encounters (O’Neill, 1995).

Imagining the Real: A New Theory of Drama in Education

Davis' (2014) drama form carried great social responsibilities—to fight unjust neoliberal dictatorship and “to strive for a society based on meeting human needs rather than on profit through exploitation” (p. 22). Drama must focus on enabling us to glimpse the real self-situation and the social forces that shape our everyday life (Davis, 2014). In *Imaging the Real*, Davis (2014) detailed the social elements in some famous dramatists. He noted both Bolton and Heathcote situate the personal/self in the context of society and regard children as social beings (Davis, 2014). From a perspective of the lineage of the theatrical tradition, Davis (2014) saw the conscious distance from the Stanislavski tradition which “focused on the subjective relationship of the actor with the role” (p. 34) among dramatists like Heathcote, Bolton, O'Neill, and Neelands. Bolton (1998) regarded the pure form of “self-expressive” as “egocentric”; and stressed that “living through” drama are examples of “making,” which is cultural and not just personal. O'Neill (1995) confirmed the importance of the Brechtian distancing approach, stating, “A degree of distance is required in the roles with which the participants are endowed” (p. 125). Neelands, a Brechtian dramatist started one of his lectures with a quote from Brecht:

We shall make lively use of all means, old and new, tried and untried, deriving from art and deriving from other sources, in order to put living reality in the hands of living people in such a way that it can be mastered (Bertolt Brecht, 1938). (Neelands, 2000, para. 1)

For Davis (2014), it was not enough to be a Brechtian dramatist as a Brechtian approach could have put “ideologized reality in the hands of ideologized people” (p. 36). Davis (2014) advocated Edward Bond's approach. Both Bond and Brecht suggested the audience to be more reflexive and see the “reality” they are in, but they took diametrically opposed approaches to

achieve that aim (Davis, 2014). Brecht distanced the audience while Bond engaged the audience. The central pursuit of Bondian drama is to put together imagination and reason—by imagining “how life might be freer and more human” (Davis, 2014, p. 152), we create a new form of consciousness which enables a human and healthy society.

A History of a Chinese Traditional Theatre – Xiqu

According to Sun (1998), traditional/classic Chinese theatre has gone through two stages—*Zaju* of the Song and Yuan dynasties (from 1279 to 1368), then *Chuanqi* in the Ming dynasty (from 1368 to 1644) and Qing dynasty (from 1644 to 1911). *Zaju* is a Northern-style opera, while *Chuanqi* is from the South. *Xiqu* (戏曲) was born and popularized during the reign of Emperor Qianlong (1736-1796). The famous Beijing opera is one type of *xiqu*. Theatrical literature of various traditions was well-developed in China with great achievements until it encountered “literary inquisition” in Qing Dynasty. A few famous full-length operas were written in the Qing dynasties, including *Peach Blossom Fan* by Kong Shangren (1648-1718) and *The Palace of Eternal Life* by Hong Sheng (1645-1704), but they too were affected by literary inquisition. In 1840, the Opium war broke out. The nature of traditional Chinese theatre went through a fundamental and cataclysmic shift as a result of the war and the literary inquisition. Traditional Chinese theatre (*xiqu*) lost its subject consciousness, because the content of *xiqu* was more distant from everyday life, while grandiose artistic form became the priority of the performance (Sun, 1998). *Xiqu* slowly lost its popularity with lay people.

Mei Lanfang (1894-1961), one of the greatest and the most famous Beijing opera actors of the 20th century, tried to save traditional Chinese theatre from dying out by incorporating a Western realistic/naturalistic tradition into the Beijing opera. At the beginning of the 20th century, Mei went abroad to introduce Beijing opera to the world. What struck the Western

artists most was not the newly added element of realism, but the Chinese expressionism *xieyi* (写意) in *xiqu* (Hsiung, 2007). The German playwright Bertolt Brecht was inspired after watching Mei's Beijing opera performance in Moscow. Mei Lanfang and the Beijing opera came to be known and admired throughout the entire world. Sadly, Mei was unable to save traditional Chinese theatre in China. In 1917, the first modern drama society (the Spring Willow Society) was established by Chinese students who went to Japan and were influenced by both Japanese theatrical reforms and the critical spirit of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. Modern drama (or stage play) soon became an outlet of political outrage and a stage for political propaganda.

During the period of the Republic of China, before the period of Communist China, Dewey's progressive education had some influence on drama theory, not drama practice, in China (Wang, 2019). From 1949 to 1979, political movements were the main theme in China. *Xiqu* was significantly affected by the political and ideological shifts (Sun, 1998). Politics became the standard for *xiqu* and during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), *xiqu* became a mill production (Fu, 2016). To produce a *xiqu*, political leaders provided the direction, lay people offered lively stories, and theatrical experts created the script based upon Mao's theoretical works (Fu, 2016). In this "mill production" process, only theatrical experts could touch upon the tradition of classic Chinese theater, but the goal of the Cultural Revolution was to cut off those traditions. Theatre or *xiqu* became a puppet of the political regime in power (Sun, 1998). There was a saying during the Cultural Revolution about theatre—"eight-hundred million population; eight model operas"—that confirmed only certain revolutionary model operas approved by the Chinese Communist Party were allowed to be performed (Fu, 2016).

Toward the end of the 20th century, Chinese scholars re-engaged with Western theatrical theory and practices. In 1995, professor Yingning Li from the Shanghai Theatre Academy

attended the 2nd annual meeting organized by the International Drama/Theatre and Education Association (IDEA). She was the only attendee from Mainland China. She attended Augusto Boal's theatre of the oppressed workshop and subsequently wrote articles to introduce Augusto Boal to the Chinese readers and started advocating and working on educational drama in China (Li, 1995, 2013). In recent years, the field of education in China has paid more attention to the theory and practice of educational drama. In 2016, East China Normal University established the institute known as "Life · Practice" Educology to promote the practice of educational drama in the classroom. From 2016 through 2018, they held three annual symposia on educational drama.

Research on General Drama Education Development in China

Educational drama is for all students to practice. Students do not have to have a drama background or major in theatre or art. In China, many researchers have theoretically explored teaching drama in nontheatrical universities (Chen, 2011; Han & Ji, 2011; Li, 2016a; Ma, 2013). Chen (2011) explored implementing amateur theatre education in all non-theatric universities and colleges. Chen proposed three strategies, direct theatre education (via profession drama courses), "osmosis" theatre education (adopting drama into other courses), and extracurricular theatre education and activities (students' self-organized theatre societies). Ma (2013) offered a theoretically sophisticated way of implementing general theatre education in non-theatric universities by examining various Western drama theories, such as Aristotle's "purification" theory, Horace's "edutainment" theory, and Stanislavski's "system" approach. In the end, Ma stated, in China, general theatre education in non-theatrical universities has only been fully developed on the theoretical level—students have classes in drama theory, but rarely have the chance to create or perform a play. Ma did not specify what forms of general theatre education should be implemented. Li (2016a) demonstrated the significance of offering drama creation

courses in comprehensive universities in Western China. Li stated that drama creation courses were substantially based on drama literature textbooks, and were lacking real theatre/stage experiences, which in turn affected students' creative initiatives negatively. Li advocated the extension of the traditional classroom from textbook to stage. Han and Ji (2011) claimed general drama education for non-theatre major students in higher education should focus on cultural dissemination function and innovation function. However, the cultural function of general drama education has been largely ignored. Han and Ji (2011) proposed three approaches to achieve the cultural function, the clarification of the ultimate goal of general drama education (cultivate cultural belonging and cultural consciousness as the main purpose of drama education), the construction of the content system (incorporate Chinese classics with the Western theatrical tradition), and the choice of realization approaches (i.e., games in the Brechtian tradition).

Some researchers have provided a historical account of the activities of drama societies in the universities (Li, 2016b; Zhang, 2000). Li (2016b) provided a historical account of the social functions and influences of the drama art group in the Southwest Associated University during the Anti-Japanese War period (1937-1945). Southwest Associated University represented a temporary merging of several northern universities due to the invasion of the Japanese army. According to Li, Southwest Associated University (1938-1946) was equipped with preliminary modern teaching ideas, such as faculty self-management, student autonomy, and all-round education. Over 70 students' societies were established at the time, with drama art group being one of the societies (Li, 2016b). The drama art group tightly connected students' artistic activities with social reality. The group spread anti-Japanese propaganda among Chinese people, helped consolidate the anti-Japanese national united front, and critiqued the autocratic dictatorship of the Kuomintang authorities. Li argued current university reforms, such as the

development of the culture of association among students in higher education, could benefit from Southwest Associated University's history. Zhang (2000) documented several students' societies (literature and art organizations, literature magazines, and theatre organizations) during the early stage of Tsinghua University (1911-1937). These socially active and progressive students' organizations carried the tradition of combining literature and art productions with activities to address the social needs of the larger society. This tradition was carried on after Tsinghua University became part of Southwest Associated University in 1937.

Zhang (2011) and Ma (2012) analogically compared drama with university teaching practices and research processes. Zhang made an analytical comparison between teaching practices in a university setting and performances of drama traditions in the theatre. Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski's theory and practices on plain drama (poor theatre) emphasized the intimate and interactive relationship between actor and spectator, which for Zhang could be an inspiration for teaching practices in the classroom. In reality, many teachers, like those actors who suffer from stage fright, build the fourth wall between the audience and themselves and stay in a state of "public solitude," a term generated by Stanislavski (Zhang, 2011). Zhang advocated for the adoption of the practices and spirit of the forum drama (created by the influential Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal) and the liberation pedagogy of Paulo Freire in university classroom teaching practices. Ma articulated similarities between a policy-oriented social survey research process and what Goffman called drama production in which the script (research plan that claims to be scientific and truthful) is constructed in advance, the actors (the researchers) are well trained, the audiences' (the participants') responses are not taken into account. In the case of a survey research, the results are socially constructed by the researchers without critically analyzing the power relationship between the researchers and the participants.

Fu and Huang (2011) studied the quantitative relationship between drama education and the well-being index of a university. They focused on an extracurricular theatre activity in one university and compared the students who attended or performed in a theatre festival and with students who did not attend or perform in the same theatre festival. The authors concluded that drama education could be an effective way for university students to cope with the stress and difficulties of everyday life, which could in turn improve their overall well-being.

In conclusion, the grand theory and national history I have elaborated in this chapter helped me to situate this research project in a historical and theoretical context, and to make sense of the research in a meaningful way. Growing up in China, I was socialized to undervalue personal issues and individual power in dialectically shaping and reshaping the larger context of cultural, social, institutional and environmental life. This research project was an attempt to go against the image of helpless individuals, and to connect and situate individuals with a larger context. To do that, I need to connect our micro actions to a macro context that provides the conditions of possibility for actions to happen on a larger stage of history. Secondly, before or during a research project, I need to look back at history, contemplate the present, and imagine possible futures to situate the research project in the realm of historical struggles. All history is the history of struggle. This is a new state of mind for me. I never imagined being part of the making of history before a few years back.

The theatrical literature in this chapter taught me that individual stories and struggles for solidarity and happiness are connected to, and as important as grand narratives, such as “being in becoming.” I used the theatrical literature and the literature on critical pedagogy detailed in this chapter to create a collective theatrical experience. The methodology for this effort is described in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3: PLAYBUILDING: A PARTICIPATORY ARTS-BASED APPROACH

This research project is inspired by and based on the theory and practice of playbuilding (Bray, 1991; Norris, 2009) and the theatrical tradition of improvisation (Dudeck, 2013a, 2013b; Johnstone, 1987; Spolin, 1999). The research design is informed by critical pedagogy. These approaches seek the interactive and meaningful participation of the research participants for the purpose of both stimulating and deepening our understanding of spontaneous and collective theatrical creations. At the same time, these approaches are rooted in social contexts and strive to make progressive changes to our self-perceptions, our relationships with others, and our relationships with the world. The elements of the research design include the research procedure, data sources, research strategy on data generation, interpretation, performance, participant recruitment, the researcher's subjectivity statement, and research ethics.

The Research Procedures

This participatory arts-based research project consists of eight graduate students from Northeast Normal University (NENU) in Changchun, China. As coresearchers, they participated in eight playbuilding sessions. From June 2018 to July 2018, the students participated in two 6-hour sessions on Wednesdays and Sundays with one-hour lunch break time (see Appendix B).¹¹ Our eight playbuilding sessions (see Table 1) loosely followed the eight technical steps (see Table 2) of a collective creation (Berry & Reinbold, 1985; Wallewei, 1994). All eight sessions took place in a rented studio apartment near the university campus.

¹¹ Our original plan was to have 3-hour sessions. Before the second week, we modified the schedule to 6-hour sessions in response to participants' requests. I treated the first two 3-hour sessions as two parts of the first session.

Table 1

Collective Creation Timetable for Playbuilding Sessions

Week	Playbuilding Sessions	Playbuilding Session Contents
Week 1	Information session (3 hours)	Who am I (the researcher)? What to expect about our research project? Sign the participation contract Something about you: an improv game—Up-side-down introduction
	Session 1 (3 hours)	Story sharing while talking about favorite movies Play two improv games Watch and discuss a playbuilding vignette (video) On-site journal writing
	Session 1 (3 hours)	Reschedule our future sessions Free-floating discussion
Week 2	Session 2 (6 hours)	Play six improv games On-site journal writing and sharing Fill out questionnaire Group exercise: “I am poem” Watch and discuss two playbuilding vignettes (video)
	Session 3 (6 hours)	Check-in exercise Collection of group’s favorite movies Collective design of group identity (team name, T-shirt, logo, etc.) Outdoor games
Week 3	Session 4 (6 hours)	Playing improv games outdoors Group synthesis process: the group organized themes on a large paper Research: Choose three themes as our case study topics Discussion: Who is our audience?
	Session 5 (6 hours)	Check-in—reflect upon the 2 nd international critical pedagogy (CP) conference hosted by Education faculty (their department) Group conversation with international professors who participated in the CP conference
Week 4	Session 6 (6 hours)	Writing/devising script: Translate themes/ideas into dramatic form
	Session 7 (6 hours)	Refine script (making choices, exclusion and inclusion of scene work)
Week 5	Session 8 (6 hours)	Casting and rehearsal
	Final rehearsal	Final rehearsal (the day before our final performance)
	Show	Final performance and on-site discussions
	Post-performance reflection	Group reflections on the final show and the entire playbuilding process

Table 2

The Eight Technical Steps of a Collective Creation and our Corresponding Sessions

Eight technical steps	Corresponding sessions¹²
1. gathering topics	1 st , 2 nd , and 3 rd sessions
2. synthesis	3 rd and 4 th sessions
3. research	4 th session
4. exploration	6 th session
5. scripting and refining	6 th and 7 th sessions
6. rehearsal	8 th session
7. performance	Final live performance
8. reflection	Post-performance dinner

The technical steps of a collective creation are considered procedural steps. I paid attention to what Norris (2009) called interpersonal steps, which involve negotiations among personal, collective, and public meanings. The three interpersonal steps represent the spirit and the soul of a collective creation. Maybe not every individual contemplates the meaning of their life, many individuals ask themselves crucial existentialist questions at some point in their life. A collective creation is exceptionally meaningful because it deals with meaning-making on different levels. That fact that many schools do not care about the well-being of students led me to conduct this kind of research that cares about our souls and our interpersonal relationships.

Personal and collective meaning-making were key elements in the research process. We asked about the meanings behind our stories and actions daily during this research project. The group came together and shared past and current events, while building trust and support among each other; these actions constitute a collective meaning-making process. Public meaning-making was demonstrated through raising critical consciousness and performing our final show to a group of audience members. The 3-level meaning-making process is conducive to fostering communal self-reflexivity and aligns with a Freirean dialogism. My research question asks

¹² The 5th session is not counted as part of the eight technical steps, because I spontaneously arranged a meeting with international professors in the 5th session.

whether a collective playbuilding project can embody and stimulate protagonistic agency. The 3-level meaning-making demanded the practicing of protagonistic agency to go beyond the individual level, to generate social awareness, and be socially active—to become the agent of social change.

Data Sources

Data for this research included: (a) over 50 hours of videotaped and audio-taped playbuilding sessions and the final live performance; (b) group members' written data (one questionnaire, onsite journals); (c) the primary researcher's written data (journal); (d) our final performance script and live discussions with audience members and actors during the final performance; and (e) our conversations one year following the completion of the project.

Digital Data

I personally videotaped approximately 50 hours of group activities during the research process as we did not have a designated person to shoot/record. Initially, we tried to assign one participant to be the designated camera person for each session. This turned out to be a distraction for the person filming and made the rest of the group more self-conscious. As a result, we decided to set the camera on a tripod as this was less distracting.

Participants' Written Data

A short questionnaire was distributed in our second playbuilding session to collect participants' perceptions and anticipations about our collective project. The questionnaire was reviewed in the middle of the research project to clarify our earlier intentions. Participants were encouraged to write onsite journals after playing games, to quietly reflect on their thoughts and behaviors and record their feelings in the moment. Participants could choose to leave their journals with me or keep them; they chose to leave their journals with me.

The Primary Researcher's Journal

As the primary researcher and a group project member, I kept records of my conceptual and emotional struggles, the lessons I was learning, and the conversations and inspirations I had inside and outside our group sessions. Journal writing helped me to practice self-care during a rather stressful time and served as a guide for group session planning efforts. The day after each session, I would watch our recorded video and conduct content logs or indexing—a time-indexed outline of the events (Barron & Engle, 2007). The use of a content log and my journal informed my session planning.

Final Performance Script and Onsite Discussions

The final performance included five acts that dealt with five thematic issues: (a) agential intentionality and decision making; (b) classroom silence, the production of personal agency, and teacher's authority; (c) mutual expectations and students' struggles; (d) the relationships between theory and practice or between academia and a life outside of academia; and I discovering meanings in relationships. There was one preshow (as a series of flashbacks in our previous playbuilding sessions) and two warm-up games. The collective script-creating process can be found in Chapter 4. The final script and discussions among audience members and actors during the final performance are detailed in Chapter 5.

A Year Later Reunion Conversations

One year after our group project was completed, I returned to China for a follow-up visit. I met with some of the group members on the NENU campus to talk about what had happened in the intervening year and what had not been formally expressed about our collective research project a year ago. Detailed information on this member checking process can be found in Chapter 5.

The research design was explicitly formulated to move beyond a traditional qualitative research project involving a single researcher. Instead, it was designed to create a group of participants collectively engaged in a theatrical project grounded in each of their lived experiences. The compelling narratives and stories that emerged from this research experience were expressed through multiple modalities, including written texts (participants' journals), one-on-one and group conversations, improvisational games, collective script writing, and the culminating live performance. These multiple modalities enabled us to better relate to each other physically, emotionally, and philosophically, to identify, assess, and challenge our emotional and rational beliefs toward protagonistic agency and power distribution, and to have our voices heard by a broader community. The spiral process of data generation, interpretation, and performance in the development of each playbuilding session is detailed in Chapters 4 and 5.

Data Interpretation Methods

I translated and transcribed all elements of this research project. Oliver, Serovich, and Mason (2005) distinguished between two dominant modes of transcription, naturalism and denaturalism. In a naturalized approach, every utterance is transcribed in detail while in a denaturalized approach, “idiosyncratic elements of speech (e.g., stutters, pauses, nonverbals, involuntary vocalizations) are removed” (Oliver et al., 2005, p. 1273). During the research process, I completed a preliminary transcription after each session, which informed my session planning. After the research process was completed, I began to consider which parts should be transcribed, at what level of detail, and with what approaches. I primarily employed a denaturalized approach to the transcription process. My research is about protagonistic agency and the various forms of human interaction. I study the forms, or the essence, of the human

interactions and therefore did not need a naturalistic transcription. I adopted three major data interpretation methods: versus coding, dramaturgical coding, and motif coding methods.

Versus Coding

The versus coding strategy helped my research efforts to express core motives for human action, conflicts, and struggle (Saldaña, 2016). The dichotomous dimensions of versus codes might appear subjective, lacking sufficient rigor for social science research. It is important to keep in mind, however, versus coding focuses on human conflicts and struggles, which constitute “core motives for human action, reaction, and interaction and should not be discounted from our investigations of the human condition” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 124).

Dramaturgical Coding

Any interpretation of reality is a distorted interpretation, as there are both objective and subjective elements to reality. We perceive life with lenses and different lenses bring out different narratives. Dramaturgical coding requires the researcher to code like a dramaturg, to perceive life as “performance” and treat narratives as “social drama” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 145). The elements of a social drama include objectives, conflicts, tactics, attitudes, emotions, and subtexts. Saldaña (2016) defines them as:

1. Objectives: participant-actor objectives, motives in the form of action verbs;
2. Conflicts: conflicts or obstacles confronted by the participant-actor which prevent them from achieving their objectives;
3. Tactics: participant-actor tactics or strategies to deal with conflicts or obstacles and to make their goals;
4. Attitudes: participant-actor attitudes toward the setting, others, and the conflict;
5. Emotions: emotions experienced by the participant-actor; and

6. Subtexts: the participant-actor's unspoken thoughts or impression management, usually in the form of gerunds.

Motif Coding

Saldaña (2016) states, "A motif as a literacy device is an element that sometimes appears several times within a narrative work [such as]...a particular element, incident, characteristic, trait, action, or unique word/phrase" (p. 150). One of my group members, Xiao Xin, often started her story with a statement: "Don't laugh at me." It turned out that one of her not-yet resolved childhood traumas was related to being laughed at.

Motif coding helped me identify my participants' transformation during the research process. When we were playing the game Trust Falls during our final performance, one of our audience volunteers, Tong, was pushed around without being able to make his own moves. Qi Li reminded him, "You have to have your own consciousness." Tong responded: "Okay. I will try it again." Interestingly, when Qi Li played the game for the first time, she, like Tong, lost her independent will. In addition, Qi Li had repeatedly claimed she did not know what she wanted. Her advice to Tong showed her growth in self-awareness and agency. Saldaña (2016) offered brilliant advice: "Don't connect someone's 'dots' – connect his or her *motifs*" (p. 157).

I adopted the versus coding method to analyze the data generated in the first three sessions (see Tables D1 & D2 in Appendix D). I used the dramaturgical coding method to analyze the three case studies we reviewed during our fourth session (see Tables D3–D6 in Appendix D). The motif codes were used throughout the research process.

Data Presentation Principles

I purposefully incorporated a significant amount of raw data in Chapters 4 and 5. Each of my participants revealed a lively character with distinctive and idiosyncratic personality traits.

They made robust attempts to invest their time in our group creation and show their capacity for emotional involvement. I wanted to incorporate their stories in their own words and their reflections, a form of preliminary data interpretation by the research group, into the research process. My participants were self-reflexive graduate students. Norris (2009) emphatically stated there is no one form of playbuilding, but many articulations of playbuilding. From a constructivist point of view, there is no single measure of an objective reality ready to be discovered. Instead, there are multiple interpretations of reality ready to be constructed by cobbling together experiential understandings of the world. As the lead researcher, I offer my version of the whole devising process in this dissertation. While I cannot extensively share with the reader my participants' versions of the process in this dissertation, the reader will have the opportunity to "judge" my interpretations. This is the beauty and existential strength of qualitative research. For the schoolteachers who want to incorporate improv games or drama into their classrooms, and for theater practitioners who conduct workshops with students in a classroom setting, they might find it helpful to read descriptions of what happened in my group creation process. I personally benefited tremendously from Norris' (2009) detailed descriptions and visual presentations of his works.

I made conscious choices about raw data selection. Making conscious choices is a fundamental part of video research (Goldman et al., 2007). Dewey (1958) argued,

selective emphasis, choice, is inevitable whenever reflection occurs. This is not evil.

Deception comes only when the presence and operation of choice is concealed, disguised, or denied. Empirical method finds and points to the operation of choice as it does to any other event. (p. 29)

I adopted a naturalistic and an equal chance principle to select quotes. A naturalistic principle is commonly used in field research (Bailey, 2007). While my research is not field research, it has some field research features. Bailey (2007) defined field research as follows: “Field research is the systematic study of ordinary activities in the settings in which they occur. Its primary goal is to understand these activities and what they mean to those who engage in them” (p. 1). Our creative project was an event that focused on the participants’ everyday lives. As the lead researcher, I did not plan the contents of our sessions but instead observed and engaged in the events as they occurred in our sessions. As my spontaneous approach to the research project resembles field research, I chose a naturalistic principle to the selection of quotes.

An equal chance principle is an ethical choice. I tried to be fair to each participant by employing the following naturalistic and equal chance principles:

1. I did not determine an event’s typicality or atypicality. I had a small number of participants. A fundamental goal of my research is to generalize the use of playbuilding instead of predicting Chinese graduate students’ behavioral patterns. I did not discriminate for or against any naturally occurring events formed and generated during our research sessions. This constituted my naturalistic principle and approach to the selection of quotations.
2. After analyzing the data, I chose what I believed were the most representative and informative participant quotes to best illustrate and reveal their attitudes/positions toward a given event. For the sake of giving each participant an equal chance to be present in my analysis, I selected quotes from each participant for each given event.

I consider one playbuilding session as one general event, with each session containing many subevents. To illustrate this idea, I detail a typical session. During each playbuilding session, we typically started with a warm-up game or a check-in conversation, followed by either continuing to discuss the topics mentioned during the check-in time or conducting a theatrical step¹³ I had previously planned. Around lunch time, I would order food for the group and we would have lunch together. I did not record our lunch time. After lunch, our game time began. Toward the end of the session, we usually shared our written and/or verbal reflections about and our personal reactions to the sessions. We might invite one participant to share some personal stories. Another participant could respond by sharing similar experiences or showing support, which might include crying together. I regarded each of these activities as one subevent. In each event, there are subevents (Goldman et al., 2007).

Sampling and Participants Recruitment

Two groups of participants included in this research project: My eight primary participants who participated in the whole research project, including the final performance, and the final performance audience.

The recruitment process for the primary participants started in June of 2018. As an alumna of Northeast Normal University who maintains close ties with professors and former students, I was able to easily access current graduate students. I used snowball sampling, a purposeful sampling technique that starts with one or several participants, who then recruit other research participants from among their acquaintances. Having a group of participants who might have already had a previously established relationship of trust saved me time in building a trust relationship among group members.

¹³ Based on Berry and Reinbold's description of the eight technical steps of a collective creation. I elaborated on it in Chapter 3.

My friend Da Lin¹⁴ who was about to graduate with his master's degree from Northeast Normal University expressed considerable interest in participating in the research project. Da Lin became both a participant/coresearcher and helped me recruit other participants by sharing my recruitment letter (see Appendix A) with his cohort through Wechat, a popular Chinese social media platform. The recruitment letter detailed both the individual characteristics I sought in the research participants and the goals of the research project.

Within one day, seven female students contacted me, and all showed up for the introductory information session. One of them, Xin Yu, had to withdraw after attending a few sessions due to her personal schedule. The remaining six female participants were able to attend all sessions and complete the research project. Two male participants, including Da Lin, also participated in the research project. One participant, Ah Yang, has been a friend of mine for many years and had expressed interest in joining my research group a year ago. Unfortunately, due to conflicting schedules, he was not able to participate in most of the sessions or take part in the final performance. But he gave me the permission to use the data he generated when he was able to participate our sessions. During the final show, Ah Yang volunteered to be our photographer. My primary participants were six female and two male graduate students. Having eight primary participants was ideal because it was both a manageable group size and was large enough that I could split the group in two and have one group be the critical audience for the other. All the primary participants were approximately the same age which provided them with a common ground from which to relate to each other.

¹⁴ All the participant names listed here are pseudonyms.

To understand the relationships between the Chinese graduate students who participated in this research project, as primary participants and audience members, I need to define a few terms.

Shi-Men: The mentor and all the mentor's students are considered one academic family—in Chinese, we call this family a Shi-Men. The mentor symbolizes the parent and the mentees are expected to treat each other as brothers and sisters. Shi means teacher, and men means gate. Together Shi and Men means we are one family under one shared roof.

Shi-Xiong, Shi-Jie, Shi-Di, and Shi-Mei: The Chinese characters Xiong and Zhang both mean older brother; Jie means older sister; Di means younger brother; Mei means younger sister. Your identification as an older brother or younger sister in a Shi-Men is based on the time you officially entered a Shi-Men. To take my particular case as an example, all the participants who share my Shi-Men with me call me Shi-Jie, because I entered earlier than they did.

Xue-Jie: Xue means study. Jia Lin, Xiao Si, and Xiao Xin, three of the research participants, are not members of my Shi-Men. To show their respect to a senior student, they called me Xue-Jie. Alternative ways to address a person who is more senior or more junior to me both in and outside of my Shi-Men are listed in Table 3.

Table 3

Ways to Address a Person in My Shi-Men and Outside My Shi-Men

	In my Shi-Men	Outside my Shi-Men
A male senior student	Shi-Xiong	Xue-Zhang
A female senior student	Shi-Jie	Xue-Jie
A male junior student	Shi-Di	Xue-Di
A female junior student	Shi-Mei	Xue-Mei

As the Shi-Men serves as the Chinese graduate student's most essential social circle on campus, the terms presented in Table 3 appear throughout this dissertation. In China, there is an

old saying, “One day my teacher, life-long my father.” Becoming a mentee means joining a family led by the mentor. My mentor once said to me, “To choose a mentee is like choosing a family member.” Because we are supposed to regard the mentor-mentee relationship as a lifelong relationship, Shi-Men get together both to have academic discussions and to celebrate holidays. The mentor helps their mentees choose thesis/dissertation topics and assists mentees to graduate successfully. During our research sessions, my participants talked about having feelings of respect and fear toward their mentors, and their relationships with other mentees. Before the final performance, one participant decided not to be in the final show because of concerns related to Shi-Men.¹⁵

Five of the eight primary research participants are members of my Shi-Men (see Table 4). Seven of the 29 of audience members at our final performance were members of my Shi-Men. The potential implications of this configuration are discussed in Chapter 4.

Table 4

Primary Research Participants

Pseudonym	Birth Year	Gender	Major (Degree Program and Year)	Members of My Shi-Men?
David	1990	Male	educational principles (doctoral student)	Yes
Guo Li	1994	Female	educational principles (master, 1 st year)	Yes
Qi Li	1994	Female	educational principles (master, 1 st year)	Yes
Da Li	1995	Female	educational principles (master, 1 st year)	Yes
Da Lin	1993	Male	educational principles (master, graduated)	Yes
Jia Lin	1993	Female	preschool education (master, 2 nd year)	No
Xiao Si	1993	Female	comparative education (master, 2 nd year)	No
Xiao Xin	1994	Female	educational principles (master, 2 nd year)	No

¹⁵ The reason I included “Shi-Men” as a column in Tables 3 and 5 is reflective of the politics of Shi-Mens in the education department. Some could see the large number of people from my Shi-Men as interpret it as a collective protest or grievance initiated by our Shi-Men. Since the culture of Shi-Men in Chinese higher education is essential, I added Shi-Men into my analysis.

During our first group session, I encouraged my primary participants to invite students and other individuals to our final performance. Two participants invited several of their friends and roommates, and I also invited friends and acquaintances to the final performance. Many of the final performance audience members were familiar with my research. Invitation letters were sent to potential final performance participants through Wechat. In the letter, I explained the nature of the study and provided detailed information about the performance. Five teachers¹⁶ and 24 students, all affiliated with NENU, participated in the final performance and discussion (see Table 5).

Table 5

Configuration of the Audience Members

	Major/Emphasis	Number	Male	Female	Members of My Shi-Men
Graduate student (24)	educational principles	8	1	7	7
	rural education	7	3	4	
	psychology	1		1	
	comparative education	3	3		
	preschool education	3		3	
	physical education	2	1	1	
Faculty (5)	educational principles;	5	1	4	4
	rural education;				
	educational sociology;				
	physical education;				
	educational history				

The consent form for the secondary participants was presented, verbally discussed and signed at the performance site prior to the performance. Both the invitation letter and the consent form for the primary and secondary participants were provided in English and Chinese.

Participants could choose either version of the document to sign.

¹⁶ In addition to the five teachers, I invited six additional faculty (one was an elementary school teacher), all of whom could not attend for various reasons. One professor stated that “your approach is really refreshing for us; not like what our students usually choose to do—grand narrative.” I invited the dean of the department of education. She did not attend the performance; I do not know why.

We had 37 people in the final performance room: Eight actors (including me; David did not participate in the final performance) and 29 audience members (including our continuity¹⁷ girl Lily and our photographer Ah Yang). Sixteen (five actors, 11 audience members) of the 37 people (almost half) in the room were associated with my Shi-Men.

Trustworthiness

Creswell (2014) lists eight strategies to enhance trustworthiness. Those strategies include prolonged engagement, crystallization (or triangulation), peer review (or a peer debriefer), negative case analysis (or discrepant information), clarification of research bias, member checking, rich description, and an external audit (pp. 639-642). I adopted five of Creswell's strategies to enhance trustworthiness. The purpose of a playbuilding research is not for truth-seeking. Some of Creswell's strategies, such as triangulation and negative case analysis, do not fit well with the constructivist paradigm of a playbuilding research. I added a few more indicators of trustworthiness to enhance this research project.

Member Checking

During the research process, I shared my researcher journals with the participants. Participants collectively decided to leave their journals with me. We had a mid-term check-in focused on how the participants felt about the primary researcher (me), the research process, and themselves. Before submitting my dissertation to the university library database, I made sure each participant had the final say about how their stories should be shared in my dissertation.

¹⁷ In the film industry, the person who oversees continuity issues is called the script supervisor. The script supervisor makes sure all details are consistent during film production, and the shooting process runs smoothly. During my final performance, Lily helped by playing our pre-recorded videos when needed, and organized and prepared our props on site. I therefore gave her the title continuity girl.

A Rich and Thick Description

I presented a significant amount of raw data in this dissertation as evidence of findings and coding process.

Clarification of Research Bias

My subjectivity statement and my insider and outsider statement clarify my bias as the lead researcher.

Prolonged Engagement

The research process lasted for five weeks during which time, we spent approximately 60 hours together as a group. In addition, I had one-on-one meetings with participants outside of the group sessions. I spend two months in China in a rented studio near the campus and kept a close relationship with participants. Five of the eight primary participants are members of my Shi-Men.

Peer Review (or a Peer Debriefing)

I selected three critical friends (Chen, Deng, and Gao) to serve as my peer debriefers. All three were master's students in education at NENU when I was a student there and we knew each other well. When I was conducting my doctoral research in China, Chen had just graduated with his Ph.D. and was about to become a faculty member at NENU. Deng had been working in the same city where NENU is located for a few years since receiving his master's degree. Gao was a full-time faculty at NENU. Deng and Gao are in my Shi-Men; they witnessed and helped me with the development of the research project and have always been great supporters of my project. Prior to, during, and after the research project, I frequently discussed the research project with them. I showed our group's first draft of the script to Chen. He offered me substantial friendly critiques which resulted in adding a pre-show to our final performance (Chen's critiques

are noted in Chapter 6). Deng and Gao are partially responsible for my decision to complete action-based research for my dissertation project (see Deng's story in Appendix F).

Based on my observations and reflections on the way our group members interacted with each other during the research project, I added the following indicators of trustworthiness.

The Emotional Aspect of the Research

My primary participants repeatedly expressed that they felt safe with me and the group. Since our first session, I demonstrated the courage to be vulnerable in front of them (Saldaña, 2016). Many of my participants revealed childhood traumas or current frustrations in our group sessions. I have good reason to believe my participants were authentic and sincere.

Reciprocity

Throughout the research process, I tried my best to serve them and presented myself as a co-struggler (Moss, 2004). As a group, we shared ownership of the research material/data. During our first meeting, I told my participants they could use the digital data we recorded in our sessions to write an academic paper or present our collective creation process at a conference. For those that chose to use the digital data, they had to follow all IRB guidelines and the group agreements about the use of the shared data.

Spontaneously Generated Topic Choices for Our Sessions and Our Final Script

Each of our sessions started with a check-in. Our conversations focused on the topics we had shared during our check-in. In this sense, our conversations were naturally generated based on whatever was on their minds at the time or from the previous week. As a group, we collectively generated our themes and built our scripts.

It felt natural to approach this project as I did because I love and respect my participants, I traveled to China several times during the research process to be with them, learn from them,

and grow together. Rules in life are imperative if we wish to act in and on the world as ethical human beings. This is one of the reasons I appreciate doing qualitative research; I am learning and writing about life while conducting my research. Tony mentioned similar feelings in our final performance. He said majoring in education taught him about happiness which made him feel happy. As I conclude this section, I want to share an inspiring story of trustworthiness I read in one of Norris' books. I kept this story in mind while conducting my research in China to remain humble and grateful in front of my participants.

Norris (2009) shared a powerful story in *Playbuilding as qualitative research*. A student-teacher told Norris he wasn't giving enough space when student teaching. He intuitively thought of using a drama activity to help students achieve a deeper understanding of this comment. One of the activities Norris conducted was called Trust Falls.

One form of Trust Falls has a person in the center of a tight circle of four to ten others who catch the person as he/she falls, keeping waist and knees tight. The catchers then restore the person to the center, and she/he falls again. The falling could be forward, backward, to one side or the other. All points of the compass are possible. Two or more participants assist in the catching. (Norris, 2009, p. 31)

Once the group finds its rhythm, the person in the center can ask for more space. The circle would then step back, creating space for a longer fall. After several rounds of longer and longer falls, Norris asked the group to describe their experience. The support group was very tired. The student who wanted more space said, "He didn't realize how much work he was putting on his support group by asking for more space" (Norris, 2009, p. 31). For Norris, this metaphoric activity acted as a mirror for students to reflect on and to see beyond their immediate positions. When I read this story, it was an epiphanic moment. The example is about trust. When

people give you trust, it is demanding in unanticipated ways. The example caused me to reflect on the requests I made of my participants in China. I realized a request I made may have been more demanding on my participants than I realized or initially anticipated it would be.

Research Ethics Plans

Voluntary Participation

Participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time. If a participant decided to withdraw from the study, they were to notify the research team immediately. The researchers would then discuss with the participant what they intended to do with the withdrawing participant's study data. As each participant was a co-researcher, they could choose to analyze the collected data or could request to have their data excluded or destroyed.

Nondisclosure Policy

Norris (2009) reminded readers that an informal "nondisclosure" rule has to be established at the very beginning of the research process to develop an ethical relationship both between the research and the participants and among the participants. This rule applies to the entire data generation/rehearsal process. A nondisclosure rule means we keep each another's stories and opinions confidential. The stories people share are opportunities to be explored. Each story is shaped and reshaped throughout the process until the final performance. A nondisclosure rule helped build trust among the group. Without such a rule, participants may have been less likely to share their valuable and highly emotional stories.

Prevention Strategies for Potential Social and Emotional Risks

Collaborative work often exposes personal and interpersonal issues. The pursuit of protagonistic agency may occur on a deeper level and trigger conflicting emotional responses. I

introduced prevention strategies to mitigate the potential social and emotional risks associated with participation in their research.

On the first day of the project, a code of conduct was co-developed with participants around group norms. These included providing an honest and safe environment for possible negative feedback, recognizing that opinions are emergent and in the process of being formed, and advising participants to talk directly with each other about behavior they were offended by as the person may be unaware of the harm caused. One of our goals was to generate inspirational and critical dialogues.

Before each session, participants were asked if any issues had arisen for them. Each participant was encouraged to share what they felt comfortable with and encouraged to seek assistance from the university's counseling center, part of the department of psychology, if needed. There were no emotional complaints throughout my research process. As a result of the trust and love generated between me and the group members, some of the participants asked me to serve as their life coach.

Subjectivity and Positionality

From the perspective of culturally responsive methodology (Berryman et al., 2013), researchers enter their work field with perspectives drawn from their own experiences which are inevitably saturated with ideology and biases. For this reason, it is vital to elaborate on the researcher's subjectivity statement and positionality about possible conflicting relationships of power.

I lived in China until I was 26 years old. My schooling experiences in China provided me with a specific form of cultural capital I shared with my participants and enabled me to be culturally responsive to many of their needs, capacities, and potentialities. My personal

schooling experiences in China mirrored those of my peers; I was creative as a child then grew bored and alienated as I remained in school. My university education in China matched the “banking education” model described by Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire. After completing my master’s degree in education in Changchun, I began my doctoral studies in the United States with a focus on arts-based research. My subjectivity statement has four parts:

Part 1: Childhood

One night, I laid in bed. One line came to my mind: Never feel shy to share who you have dreamed of becoming. I used to think the past was like cloud. It forms, then it disappears. But the past could be like seeds and trees too; it grows and keeps growing.

When I was a little girl, buying new clothes was not an option for my family because we lived in poverty. I dreamed of becoming a fashion designer so that I could make my own clothes. When I was a teenage girl, during a “charitable” school event, I, along with a few other poor students, were made to stand on stage in front of the school population while school officials handed us winter coats provided by the administration. This self-congratulatory gesture on the part of the school officials unknowingly shamed us publicly in front of 2,000 students. When you are a teenager, your world is so tiny that one shameful incident is enough to make your whole world melancholy. I was depressed, not because I was poor, but because my school put my family’s poverty on exhibit. Back then, I dreamed of being a therapist who could make people happier. Prior to becoming an undergraduate, my family was preoccupied with moving from province to province to escape the consequences of having two children during the era of China’s one child policy. The prevailing issue for me growing into young adulthood was the reality of class dispossession, poverty, and the economic austerity that faced so many families whose relatives had, for generations, survived in the countryside under near feudal conditions.

Part 2: Critical Pedagogy and Impro

I felt I had lived in darkness almost all my life, until suddenly, without warning, I was blindsided by a beam of light that burst suddenly across the educational firmament during my master's program. So powerful was this light that it compelled me to follow it with all the passion and hope I could muster. This piercing light has animated much of my life for the past seven years. This light has proven to be the antidote (my beam of light) to living in darkness. This light is critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy has made an ethical demand on me to critically examine the world, and my relationship with the world, which leads me to reflect daily on the purposes of my existence in this secular world.

I started to realize I have the potential to be a “productive” hero. As a Chinese intellectual, I ask questions, such as: What is my social responsibility as an educator, as a citizen in a democracy? What is my ontological vocation in becoming more fully human (to use a Freirean term) by engaging others in this world? What standpoint epistemology should I adopt so that my journey maintains coherence?

As a result of my near decade-long engagement with critical pedagogy, it has become glaringly apparent that I don't have to fit into a society which I feel is unjust. I came across the world of improvisation a few years ago (leading expert Keith Johnstone refers to as “impro”). Improv simultaneously trains my body and my mind. In China, neither my schooling experiences nor my social experiences encouraged me to take risks, make mistakes, or be obvious, and to make my improv partners look great while challenging them. I have witnessed my own transformation while practicing improv inside and outside of classrooms and workshops. If I want to be an influential social justice leader, I have to feel confident and comfortable enough to stand up and speak up when the situation necessitates it. The idea of changing the world might

seem obvious or cliché for North Americans but it has not been imaginable or a possible dream for me.

Part 3: The Research Project

Conducting my research project in China has been an empowering process. The project itself could be seen as an arts-based social movement that I initiated, with my participants, in my native land. I see myself as a role model for my participants because I did not have this kind of role model when I was living in China.

In 2018, I conducted this research project in Northeast China with eight graduate students who were willing to work with me to collectively examine our experiences as products of the Chinese educational system. Together with our research project, I represent some of the possibilities and hopes of arts-based performance learning in China. I wanted to show my participants they are capable of shaping and creating their lives and their environment. While it is true that there are limits and obstacles, we long for freedom as conscious and self-reflexive human beings and can experience that freedom by exercising our agency. When I was interacting with my participants, I often felt both very stressed and extremely empowered. My body was full of adrenalin each day since I was living my dream of being there with them and for them.

Positionality: Insider and Outsider

According to Goffman (1986a), a difference in a group can only be significant if it is conceptualized collectively by the group. Stigmatized difference has to occur within a group. If you are an outsider, your difference is allowed or at least accepted which means it is not a stigma. I did not experience the same kind of freedom before coming to the United States. This is not necessarily because the United States is a freer country, but because, in Goffman's terminology, I am an outsider. When I go back to China, I always have the option of going back

to the United States. I felt freer in China for this reason, too. I currently enjoy the privilege of not entirely being in either group. I am not looking for sameness in either country. I don't know how long this process of being in a foreign land will last. I remain open to any and all challenges.

Herr and Anderson (2015) pointed out that the notions of insider and outsider are never fixed but remain fluid throughout the research process. When a storyteller shares their story, the audience remains outsiders to both the story and the storyteller. After the storyteller and the audience collectively re-play the story physically and search for solutions, the audience becomes insiders to the story. To be invited as a true insider—to participate in the same struggle with others—constitutes an ethical condition and a political statement.

In this research project, the participants (eight Chinese graduate students), as coresearchers, exercised the final determination over what to include or exclude in the study. This was research done with the people, not on the people (Carspecken, 2005). As a critical ethnographer Phil Carspecken (2005) beautifully stated:

Critical theory therefore advocates conducting social research in ways that differ enormously from mainstream research. Researchers must not totally disengage themselves from the people of their studies. They should to the extent possible regard themselves as fellow citizens and work with people rather than study them. Research findings should not be cast as something fixed but rather as a fallible contribution to public discussion and debate, a contribution to social life, a carefully thought-through point of view that anticipates as yet unknown responses from other citizens. (p. 20)

CHAPTER 4: THE COLLECTIVE PROCESS—FORM AND CONTENT

Devising, one of the key terms used in playbuilding, is the creative process from which a play is brought to life through the devisers' collaborations and artistic choices (Bishop, 2014; Norris, 2009). My research questions, the components of protagonistic agency and my two major perspectives (a theatrical and a critical perspective) are the guidance to the devising process.

My research question was: How can the process of playbuilding (the collective creation of a play) serve as a creative means for students to problem-pose their university experiences through the development of protagonistic agency (shifting from the role of spectator to actor)? Two subquestions, each corresponding to specific playbuilding sessions, helped answer my overall research question. Sub-question 1 was: How do graduate students articulate their identity and life experiences, and reflect on their agency and positionality as protagonists in their lives within the university setting? Sub-question 2 was: What happens when graduate students are given space and time to collectively problem-pose personal experiences and social norms, translate ideas into theatrical form, and theatrically perform elements of their lives as protagonists?

The concept of protagonistic agency was developed as a desired form of human interaction for this research project. My first sub-question constituted a critical inquiry of the various forms of human (inter)actions my participants and I co-presented when we defined ourselves and named our experiences. After comparing the key elements of protagonistic agency with the various forms of human interactions my participants and I co-presented in the first three playbuilding sessions, I had a general idea of what elements of protagonistic agency we needed to focus on in subsequent sessions. In chapters 4 and 5, I presented what happened when we collectively problem-posed our living experiences through five conversational and performative

stages: We had a group discussion stage (we conducted case studies on three chosen topics in the fourth session), a stage of an authentic encounter (we exchanged passions and friendships with some international critical pedagogues in the fifth session), a classroom presentational stage (we organized an improv game workshop after the fifth session), an improvised performative stage (we devised our scripts in the sixth session), and a stage of scripted performance with live discussion (we performed our final show in front of audience members). In chapter 6, I critically discussed how well protagonistic agency was embodied by us, from a critical pedagogy and a theatrical perspective.

As all the research was conducted in Mandarin Chinese, all data and reflections were translated into English. When possible, I used the English equivalent of a Chinese saying/term. In those instances where there is no known English equivalent, I provided a literal translation and included the original Chinese text next to the translation. The raw data (conversations) and my initial coding of the first four playbuilding sessions are presented in Appendix D. In this story of a collective creation, my name is Angie.

An Information Session: Before Taking Off

One of my major goals in our information session was status management. From a theatrical perspective, status awareness/management is essential in Johnstone's improv system. For Johnstone (1987), every action or movement implies a status—there is no motiveless behavior. In an improv exercise or a daily “casual” conversation, “everyone attacks the status of everyone else while pretending to be friendly” (p. 35). This can happen intentionally or unintentionally. This kind of masked competition could severely hinder an improviser's performance. In real life, many of us might frequently sense this kind of competitive energy. Johnstone designed a game to resolve this tension by assigning a high or low status to different

people in a group, the group would stop competing and instead, assist each other in their assigned status (Johnstone, 1987). Johnstone (1987) called this the “see-saw” principle: I go up and you go down. I have played status games in Theresa Dudeck’s class at Chapman University and was struck by the transformative effect of the transparency of the power relationship on the way students perform.

From a critical perspective, status management is power management. By purposefully lowering my status, I shared power with the group. During our research sessions, my group members touched on issues related to status. We talked about how the statuses of a teacher in the classroom affect students’ reactions and performances. Johnstone (1987) believed a master teacher was a teacher who knew how to maneuver status in front of students. I believe this is an essential skill for a participatory qualitative researcher.

Table 6 documents the events that took place in the information session, the intents of those events, and my cultural hypotheses. I was born in China and raised in the Northeast region until I was 26 years old. The hypotheses represent my quick onsite judgments that guided my improvised conversations with my research group and my decisions in the research process.

The information session was an introductory session. We played our first game, up-side-down introduction. I did the majority of the talking. The group members mainly listened and did not offer much verbal response.

Table 6

Information Session: Events, Intents, and Cultural Hypotheses

#	Events	Intents	Cultural Hypotheses
1	Self-exposure: I started the conversation by sharing that I was really worried initially and felt grateful and relieved once I saw them in front of me.	Status management: lower my status	Power relationships exist wherever human beings exist collectively. By telling my participants I was really worried, it might ease their worry. It could also be

#	Events	Intents	Cultural Hypotheses
			empowering for my participants to know they are needed and appreciated. Our mentality affects our feelings of inferiority or superiority.
2	Angie (story-sharing): “A few years back, when I just arrived in America, I managed my thoughts in Chinese in my mind, then I translated my thoughts into English to communicate with people. Now I reverse the process each time when I visit China from America. If I cannot come up with certain Chinese words, please help me. I might talk disorderly, like a weirdo. But it will only be for a week or so.”	Status management: I explained my situation to the group in a self-mocking way, with a light-heartedness (I included laughter and spoke in a sincere tone).	Chinese people in China have bias toward their countrymen who have studied abroad and who use English and Chinese in one sentence. It might be interpreted as showing off or purposefully raising their status.
3	Share my life history: Childhood experience (1): A countryside girl; not a city girl	Status management: lower my status	Due to historical disparities in social status between city dwellers and countryside folks, city dwellers are often conveyed as superior.
4	Childhood experience (2): I lived in different boarding schools ever since grade one. In my primary school dormitory, children played freely with limited adult regulation or supervision. We loved playing games such as make-believe (also called playing house). It was natural for us to make up stories or act/pretend. Our physical presence provided everything we needed for our games.	Sharing of personal philosophies: (1) From a broad perspective, we are all actors in our daily life. We all can act. (2) I appreciate and enjoy close personal relationships developed through collective activities. (3) I believe there is a connection between academia and daily life. Through storytelling, I try to connect my personal experiences with my academic interest.	
5	Angie: “The longer I stayed in school, the more I felt bored and alienated. The kind of education I received kills my curiosity and creativity.”	Raise a critical question: What kind of knowledge or ways of learning is valued most in schools?	By sharing my cultural stories, I hoped to encourage them to share their stories.
6	Share of my life history: A geographical change and a lifestyle shift: I moved from China to the U.S. when I was 26 years old. I had an opportunity to	Sharing of personal interests: Intuitively, I love getting close to people, physically and psychologically.	I assume and would love to believe that affection/love is one of our deep-seated cross-cultural desires.

#	Events	Intents	Cultural Hypotheses
	witness, experience, and reflect on different ways of living. I thought I was a more theory-oriented person when I was doing my master's degree research. Then I met my mentor in the US, Professor SooHoo. She encouraged me to explore my potential. Because of my mentor and others' encouragements and my own characteristic traits, I chose to enroll in an improvisation class the summer of 2017. I totally fell in love with this way of performing and living life.		
7	My impression: Compared to American classrooms, my experiences in Chinese classrooms were not very active or interactive. In China, many of us are doing similar things and chasing similar goals. I am not saying we should try to be different for the sake of being different. We are built to be different as long as we listen and follow the whispers and longings of our hearts. I love a quote from a poem by Robert Frost, which was a theme in Dead Poet's Society: "Two roads diverged in the woods and I, I took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference."	Sharing some of my observations from my bi-cultural perspective to indicate my wish for a more active Chinese classroom.	Classroom engagements relate to an individual's sense of responsibility in a group and in a society.
8	Share the research project: "I have been planning and preparing for this research project for over a year."	Let my participants know I am serious about doing this research.	
9	Explain our research project through a PowerPoint presentation of my dissertation proposal.	Offer a general picture of our research project.	We don't have to plan ahead of the time in great detail. Sometimes, resolutions present themselves if we are brave enough to take an unknown route and be spontaneous.
10	"When we finish our project, we would have been living our lives together for over a month. We can never erase, nor deny that."	Sharing my expectation for our group atmosphere: I wish us to be a family-like group eventually.	

#	Events	Intents	Cultural Hypotheses
11	Share our group values: (1) Facilitate an honest environment so we can speak more freely and get to know ourselves better through other people's eyes or perspectives. (2) Take the uncomfortable moment as an opportunity, other than a moment of pure embarrassment or even a purposeful attack.	Forming a safe space for each member of the group: Everybody on the team has an important role to play and has a final say on how he/she is presented in writing.	
12	Explanation of three onsite props. (1) A stuffed crow (a puppet): functions as a talking stick. Our toy crow will be passed randomly from person to person as they speak and only the person holding the crow is allowed to talk during that time. (2) Notebooks: We each have one notebook to write onsite journals. (3) A video camera: We will have a video camera shooting our activities from our first official playbuilding session.	Forming a democratic space for our future sessions—each participant will have the opportunity to share; nobody should dominate the conversation; and a horizontal power relationship is honored and will be established.	
13	Sign the research participation contract. Collectively set up future meeting times & our lunch plan	Housekeeping	
14	Our first game: Up-side-down introduction ¹⁸	Served as an icebreaker; the group members get to know each other through sharing stories	
15	Homework: (1) Watch one TED talk on vulnerability; (2) Use a “story spine” ¹⁹ to share with the rest of the group three of your favorite movies in our next meeting. I sent to the group my homework sample.	Sharing a community expectation: we welcome and honor vulnerability here. Through sharing our favorite films, we can generate great discussions and come up with many possible topics for our theatrical scenes.	Vulnerability is powerful in relationship building. “Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow; and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks”, stated bell hooks (1994).

¹⁸ The analysis of the game is presented in Table D2 (see Appendix D).

¹⁹ I shared with the group a “story spine” to share a story. The story spine goes: “Once upon a time...Every day... Until one day...Because of that... Because of that... Because of that...Until finally...And ever since then...The moral of the story is...” I learned this story spine from Dr. Dudeck in my improv class at Chapman University.

The First Three Playbuilding Sessions²⁰

First Playbuilding Session (I)²¹

My journal: Our plan was that I prepare lunch and snacks for everybody. My participants brought snacks, nevertheless. They were very polite and kind-hearted. . . . Our first short playbuilding session lasted for 3 hours. Some participants remained for another half hour after our meeting. My interpretation is that some of my participants felt very comfortable to be here.

During our first 3-hour session, we played two improv games: “A Word at a Time Mantras” and “Zip, Zap, Boing.” I shared my favorite films with the group using the “story spine” technique. The three films I shared were *The Butterfly Effect* (2004), *Never Let Me Go* (2010), and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008). We then discussed issues in the participants’ lives and related those issues to the movies. We had long and deep conversations. We did not have enough time for the participants to share their favorite movies. I collected their favorite movies in our following session; and incorporated those favorite movies into our final performance script, as each participant shared with the audience their favorite movies and the reasons behind their choices. At the end of our session, we watched a playbuilding vignette from Joe Norris’s website *Whose pencil?* My intention was to familiarize the participants with different forms of theatrical performance by watching playbuilding vignettes.

²⁰ The main purpose of the first three sessions were topic gathering and synthesis, I combined the data analysis process for the first three sessions. The remaining sessions were analyzed individually.

²¹ Originally, we planned to meet for 3 hours per session. We changed the plan after our third meeting. The group thought it would be better to have fewer sessions and extend the time for each session from 3 hours to 6 hours. Starting week 2, we had 6-hour sessions. I combined the two short playbuilding sessions (session I & II) in the first week into one session with two parts.

First Playbuilding Session (II)

My journal: At the beginning of our second short session, only four participants (all from my Shi-Men) showed up. The rest of the group members told me either on the day of the session or the day before that they could not make it.²² I started to feel anxious, because if their lives got too busy, they might not be able to attend our sessions. At the same time, I would feel really guilty if this research overwhelms them. What can I do for my participants? How can I benefit them? I sincerely and repeatedly asked them how I could I assist them so that they could participate. And I have been trying my best to offer academic support and emotional support to them.²³

Readjust our session schedule. Three of my participants suggested we adjust our session schedule. Guo Li explained her time became more scattered because of our frequent meeting schedule. I echoed her sentiment. She said, “For instance, I am planning to prepare my presentation this afternoon. But I have to take out 2 or 3 hours out of my afternoon time. Not only that, when I go back, I have to take time to get into my study zone. Then it will come to

²² Ah Yang informed me in the morning that he couldn’t be here again because he had an emergency meeting. Ah Yang showed up in one hour late to our session. Xiao Xin contacted me in the morning and told me she needed to present one of her in-process essays with her mentor tomorrow. She wanted to skip a session to prepare for it. I totally understood her position and suggested she come to the session and we could help her as a group. “But it is your call”, I wrote to her. She decided to work on her paper herself. Xiao Si had to help her mentor to finish up a research project, which was due soon. It was Xin Yu’s dissertation defense day.

²³ Xin Yu really liked our “I poem” activity. She asked me whether she could use it in her classroom. I sent her the “I poem” in a pdf file. Guo Li, Qi Li, and Da Li wanted to interview me for their class project. They interviewed me one night on campus and shared their written report with me afterwards. Jia Lin was interested in children’s drama and games. I shared with her Augusto Boal’s book on games. Ah Yang called me in one afternoon and shared with me his frustrations and stresses at work. We talked about how to use improvisation to sharpen communication skills in daily life. He cried then felt much better after our one-and-a-half-hour conversation. Upon a request from Guo Li, we had over 2 hours of conversation while strolling on the university sports field. I was really nervous prior to meeting her because she did not indicate what she wanted to talk about. I worried she might want to withdraw from the group because she looked stressed in our last session and cried in front of the group. It turned out she was stressed because of her personal entangled relationship with two other people. I tried my best to figure things out and encourage her to say “no” when necessary.

dinner time. I won't have any work done." We decided to change our session schedule to two sessions per week and six hours per session. This allowed us to finish our sessions earlier.

This session was our second (and the last) 3-hour session. Since three of the female participants mentioned their frustration with the presentations they were required to make in their classes throughout the year, I opened up a space in our session to listen to the requirements for their presentations and to respond to their grievances. This led to a few long conversations about the students' heavy homework load and the structure of their classes.²⁴ Toward the end of the session we engaged in an informal discussion about boyfriends and girlfriends—views on romantic relationships and sex education in schools.

Second Playbuilding Session: An Improv Game Session

Our second session could be named an improv game session. We played seven games: up-side-down Introduction, one-word-at-a-time mantra, zip, zap, boing, and freak out, color and advance, Columbian hypnosis, Trust Falls, and "I Am" poem (see the description of the games in Appendix C; see players' reflections of the games in Appendix D). The purpose of playing improv games in this research process included: to train our bodies and minds to be ready for theatrical activities; to form a group spirit; to create a relaxing, exciting, and reflexive group atmosphere; and to provide opportunities to amplify and examine our "taken-for-granted" and subconscious behaviors—to deconstruct our "real consciousness" (Dueck, 2013a), and then reconstruct them into "potential consciousness" (Freire, 2001).

²⁴ The group reviewed the topic of "classroom formation and students' classroom presentations" with a "case study" formula in Week 3 (4th playbuilding session) in more detail. To avoid repetition, I chose not to elaborate on this topic in the Week 1 session analysis.

David joined our playbuilding group. All the group members completed the questionnaire I designed. Toward the end of the session, we watched two playbuilding vignettes: “Whose pencil?” and “Are you listening?”²⁵

Third Playbuilding Session

After the first three sessions, I shared with the group a rough transcript and the content log (or indexing; Barron & Engle, 2007) of our previous sessions. Based on my transcription and our memory, we collectively distilled a list of the themes—classroom organizing strategies (i.e., small group discussion and student presentation), phenomena in a classroom (i.e., silence in the classroom, dispersed responsibility, authority), relationship between teachers and students (inside and outside of one’s Shi-Men), a good student vs. a bad student, distinctions among various positionalities (friends, allies, bystanders, and free riders), life choices (necessity vs. spontaneity, change vs. stability, inner drive vs. external drive, rational vs. irrational choices, legitimate or reasonable choices, meanings behind attending a graduate school), the dialectic of failure; high or low self-esteem, perform or hide, digital devices and interpersonal relationships, sex education, and a dialectical relationship between the leader and the follower.

Questionnaire

I developed a questionnaire with five questions to have a preliminary understanding of my participants’ perceptions and anticipations about our collective creation project. The questionnaire was completed during our second playbuilding session. The first two questions (see my participants’ response in Tables 26 and 27 under Appendix B) are factual and perceptual questions (Q1: Do you have any previous experiences with theatrical performances?

²⁵ The scripts and analyses of the two vignettes were in Chapters 12 and 13 of Joe Norris’s (2009) *Playbuilding as Qualitative Research*. Norris posted many of the vignettes mentioned in his book on his website: http://www.joenorrisplaybuilding.ca/?page_id=149

Q2: What are your general perceptions toward drama?). The last three questions are reflective questions, which were designed to highlight each participant's intentionality (Q3: What attracted you to be part of the research group?), positionality (Q4: What are your expectations toward our project?), and their awareness of agency (Q5: What are your concerns toward our project?).

I interpreted my participants' responses to the Questions 3, 4, and 5 using Norris's (2009) three levels of interpersonal relationships—the personal, the collective, and the public level. The three levels of meaning-making stipulate a collective playbuilding process goes beyond the individual level, generates social awareness, and can be active on a social level—with the participant becoming an agent of social transformation. I identified two levels of interpersonal relationships in my participants' responses: a personal level and a collective level (see Table 7). A personal level relationship includes improving self and connecting with others. A collective level relationship means being aware of one's positionality in a group and collective-level agency—care for the well-being of the group.

Table 7

Group Members' Questionnaire Responses and the Researcher's Interpretation

	Q3 What brought you here?	Q4 Expectations toward the project	Q5 Concerns toward the project
Xiao Xin	I want to get to know a new experience, and to have new friends. I want to go beyond of my own routine environment, and to observe other's lives.	I also want to amplify my advantages; and to increase my level of self-acceptance.	What if I did not amplify my advantages, but rather amplified my disadvantages?
Interpretation	Personal level	Personal level	Personal level
Qi Li	I want to re-examine and reflect on myself through sharing my stories and hearing other's stories.	To see different lives and stories; to better understand myself	I might not be able to participant due to a conflict of schedules. I might find out more disappointing features about myself.
Interpretation	Personal level	Personal level	Personal level

	Q3 What brought you here?	Q4 Expectations toward the project	Q5 Concerns toward the project
Da Li	I see this opportunity as a spice in my school/campus life; I am interested in this novel research methodology.	I want to make new friends here; and to better understand me and others in this process.	I worry whether I can be truly open in the research process.
Interpretation	Personal level	Personal level	Personal level
Da Lin	I am interested in playbuilding. I wish to learn this methodology by experiencing it.	Make my contribution to the research project; better understand myself and improve my ability to express myself.	I worry whether I could be understood by other team members; and whether my opinions could be useful or effective.
Interpretation	Personal level	Personal and Collective level	Personal level
Jia Lin	Firstly, I am interested in drama; secondly, I want to understand what playbuilding is; thirdly, I want to know more like-minded friends through this unique experience and broaden my scope of knowledge.	I wish the group could collectively create a satisfying show. Meanwhile, I wish to be understood by others and to understand myself better as well.	Whether I could contribute to the group work in a meaningful way. Could not finish our group assignments on time.
Interpretation	Personal level	Personal and Collective level	Collective level
Xiao Si	One day, all of a sudden, I found myself disliking the “collective lifestyle.” I prefer being alone. This collective playbuilding opportunity is a new challenge to me, I wish to get out of my “locked room.”	I wish our group could have a great emotional atmosphere throughout the process; the group work together to support Angie’s pioneering work.	Whether I could be a committed member of the group. Whether I could be helpful to the group.
Interpretation	Personal level	Personal and Collective level	Collective level
Guo Li	I love acting.	I see it as an opportunity to satisfy my acting urge and to enjoy myself.	I worry we might simply construct a dramatic show, but I could not sense the educational significance.
Interpretation	Personal level	Personal level	Collective level
David	Study the relationship between rationality and irrationality.	How rationality and irrationality work when a	I might not be able to construct a theory out

	Q3 What brought you here?	Q4 Expectations toward the project	Q5 Concerns toward the project
		group of people devise a show with creativity	of some disorganized observations.
Interpretation	Personal level	Personal level	Personal level

Based on my group's responses to the questionnaire, one of the key themes that emerged was "identity searching." The process of identity-searching played a fundamental role in the lives of my participants, as it is for almost everyone. Many of the participants indicated they were seeking significant connections with others. My participants' major concerns revealed in their questionnaire responses stayed in personal and collective levels of interpersonal relationship. In the subsequent sessions, we paid more attention on the public level interpersonal relationship.

Form Analysis: The Seven Types of Human Interactions

After the first three sessions, we generated and named some preliminary themes. In the subsequent sessions, we chose some of the themes to explore theatrically. When writing this dissertation, my concern, as the lead researcher, was to analyze the various types of human (inter)actions the group members had performed and revealed when presenting their living experiences. In other words, during the collective creation process, my group members' focus was on the themes (the content) of the stories they had shared, because one of our group goals, as a playbuilding team, was to present a final show based on some chosen themes. After the collective creation process, my focus, as the lead researcher, was on the ways (the form) my group members interacting with others or their life struggles, because my goal for this dissertation was to look for and provide conditions of possibility for the development of protagonistic agency. This is the origin to the name of this chapter "Form and Content".

I chose the versus coding method to code our group activities; then, abstracted the various types of human interactions from the versus codes (see Appendix D). The versus coding

strategy assisted my research efforts to express core motives for human actions, human conflicts, and struggles (Saldaña, 2016). My next step was to compare the generated types of human interactions to the components of protagonistic agency (as a desired type of human interaction in the research project), to explore conditions for the embodiment of protagonistic agency. I generated and named seven types of human interactions out of the data: (a) An “other-referencing” identity; (b) Views of life: views on self (a “self-referential” identity); views on the world/society; (c) Behavioral principles (include three types of driving forces): positive or negative reinforcement, time/emotion/public image management, decision-making strategies (affected by other’s opinions, feeling trapped in a dilemma, legitimacy of an action); (d) Critical thinking: social class analysis, power analysis, social awareness; (e) Connections: “I & you” connection, “I & group” connection, “body & mind” connection; (f) Positionality; and (g) Agency: a wished-for agency, an intimidated agency, a powerless agency, a not-yet named agency, a veiled agency (a follower’s role), a collective agency, agencies in different positions, a critical agency (be the change), a metaphysical agency, and an innate agency. What follows are detailed illustrations on the eight generated types of human interactions:

An “Other-Referencing” Identity (Self—Others)

I use “self—others” to indicate the human interactions that occur within identity formation. Social beings construct their identities in relationship with others. In my research context, my concern was with the reactions of “faceless” others my participants have been affected and conditioned by—opinions that are not expressed by specific individuals. I name this kind of identity seeking an “other-referencing” identity (see Table 8): When one person identifies I through a comparison with the judgement of faceless others, I become an empty/rootless I, because, the central core of the person’s identity is stripped away.

Table 8

An “Other-Referencing” Identity

A type of human interaction	An “other-referencing” Identity (self—others) Self: A; Others: A (represents “faceless” others)	
Diagramic expression
Quotes	“I was a top student.” “I was in a top-performance class.”	“I want to be different from others.”
Literal explanation	A hierarchical relationship leads to competition.	An “other-referencing Identity” is a rootless identity.

To take the following claim as an example: “I am not like them.” When the emphasis in this sentence is on “NOT” (I am NOT like them), one defines oneself by negating others.

Comparatively, When the emphasis is on “AM” (I AM not like them), it means one finds a core in oneself to define oneself. My distinction between the two situations above was inspired by Hegel’s (2015) writings in dialectical reasoning and the double negation in The Science of Logic. When one moves beyond the binary concept of self vs. other; and engage in a dialectical relationship between self and other, the kind of identity formation process resembles the second negation.

Views of Life

Based on my research data, the concept of “views of life” includes two non-mutually exclusive scenarios, views on self and views on the world/society. I use “self; world” to indicate this type of human interaction. The semicolon between “self” and “world” indicates some “not yet” formed connections between self and the larger world (see Table 9).

Table 9

Views of Life

A type of human interaction	Views of life (<u>self</u> ; <u>world</u>) Self: A; World: W	
Diagrammic expression
Quotes	<p>“I am kind of contradictory—I am nostalgic, but... what I am thinking is that we cannot dwell in the past too much, since it will not be good for the present, nor the future.”</p> <p>“I like new things; at the same time, I am afraid of new things.”</p>	<p>“Our life is predominantly directed by external forces/factors, such as chance... If the present is like a dot, and theoretically we could go any directions, what is the meaning of the past to the present, or the future?”</p> <p>“I often wonder—are we living our lives or are we merely surviving?”</p>
Literal explanation	A “self-referential” identity with no obvious connections between “who I am” and “my interactions with the world.”	No obvious connections between our philosophies of the world and our actions.

Our “views of life” are often the motives that drive our actions. However, we are not always conscious of the connections between our views of life (our philosophies) and our actions. The dialectical connections between philosophy and practice are called praxis in Freire’s critical lexicon (Freire, 2003). Without consciously connecting our views/philosophies to our action, our views become empty, eviscerated, or numbed into isolation; and our actions become mysterious and alien to our minds.

Behavioral Principles

I created a formula to explain “behavioral principles”: If one does a, a’ will happen; if one does b, b’ will happen. Since one prefers a’ to b’, one tries to avoid doing b. I use “reaction—action” to indicate this one-dimensional behavioral principle. It is one-dimensional because there is no intervention or challenge to this formula of behavioral principles.

Based on the data from the first three playbuilding sessions, I found three factors that drove my participants' behavioral principles: a positive or negative reinforcement, with the negative reinforcement functioning like a stigma (Goffman, 1986); decision-making factors (i.e., other's opinions; a dilemma situation; or the legitimacy of an action); and daily management of our time/emotion/public image (see Table 10).

Table 10

Behavioral Principles

A type of human interaction	Behavioral principles (reaction—action) Action: a – (outside) Reaction: a’ Action: b – (outside) Reaction: b’ b̄ (b with strikethrough) means avoiding b		
Diagramic expression
Quotes	<p>“Depends on a teacher’s confidence level—a teacher has to be confident enough to be challenged by students. However, in China, very often students are afraid of ‘public shaming’ a teacher by raising a challenging question; or ‘public shaming’ themselves by answering a question wrongly.”</p> <p>When playing some of our improv games, we cheer for one’s own or others’ mistakes, as a positive reinforcement. Qi Li (on-site journal): “I wish people accept and celebrate mistakes in real life too.”</p>	<p>Angie: “Go back to our situation here: Since we have been feeling sick of the students’ presentations, what can we do to change the situation? What about collectively writing an email to a professor”?</p> <p>Guo Li: But if we collect students’ signatures, won’t the professor wonder—What do you want? Rebellion?</p> <p>Da Lin: You don’t see that happen often for sure.</p>	<p>“I have not been feeling happy; I try to hide my unhappiness with a smile”</p> <p>“But today, I feel sad because for the past few days I did not feel like studying and I did not want to do anything. But only studying gives me a sense of security and accomplishment. Because I don’t have any other talents. Growing up, the only two things I have been doing are studying and play. If I don’t study, I don’t have a life.”</p>
Literal explanation	Positive (a’) or negative (b’) reinforcement; To avoid b’, people stop doing b.	If action b is seen as illegitimate; then avoid b.	If action b is seen as socially unaccepted; then avoid b.

Critical Thinking

Critical Thinking in our research context was manifested by questioning behavioral principles. To borrow the formula in “behavioral principles”, one questions why a’ or b’ are legitimate responses to a and b? Engaging in critical thinking means re-evaluating the relationship between self and the world. I use “self—world” to indicate critical thinking and identified three signs of critical thinking in our first three sessions: social class analysis, social awareness, and power analysis (see Table 11).

Table 11

Critical Thinking

A type of human interaction and Diagramic expression	Critical thinking (self—world) Self: A; World: the oval shape
Quotes	Angie: “My impression is that many kids from countryside want to be a teacher, because they probably have not seen many other career options around them. I will say it is a social class related issue.”	Angie: “The teacher’s words equal authority.” Da Li: “Pretty much so.” Angie: “We have to value our own voices first. Then, our voices will grow and continue to inspire others. Besides, there are multiple dimensions of value, such as the scientific dimension and the personal/experiential dimension.”	Qi Li shared with us a story about a poor older lady who digs into rubbish bins everyday outside of her dormitory building. She felt so sad for the older lady and cried.
Literal explanation	Social class analysis (Connect one’s ambition with one’s social class)	Power analysis—Whose knowledge is more valuable? (Connect knowledge with power)	Social awareness (Connect one’s emotion with others’ happiness)

Connections

Our group members felt connected when we played improv games because the code “connection” appeared most often in our group members’ reflections of the improv games. The

kind of connections our group members had felt is often intuitive, with a feature of “here and now,” Freire called them “unarmed curiosity” (Freire, 2001, p. 43). I use “I & you” (the power of expressing self and listening to others), “I & group” (the power of a ritual performance), and “body & mind” to indicate the kind of human interactions I identified in the data (see Table 12).

Table 12

Connections

A type of human interaction	Connections (I & you, I & my group, & body & mind)		
Diagramic expression
Quotes	“When I repeated ‘I am a person who practices Kong Fu’, I was touched in a powerful way by my own statement. When do we have the opportunity to seriously speak out loud about our wishes and our hopes? We sit here; and we listen to each other’s stories. I feel so real. Nowadays, with cell phones and technology, we have less and less face-to-face communications.”	Angie: “When we were repeating who we are during the second round, my heart was touched by this power of ritual performance. We all are unique beings, which is absolutely legitimate in itself—we don’t have to prove to anyone the value of our existence.”	Qi Li (onsite journal): “It could be the familiarity with the game that causes my body to react to the game independently, without my conscious thinking. I feel more relaxed this time”
Literal explanation	“I & you” Connection—the power of expressing self and listening to others	“I & my group” Connection—the power of a ritual performance	“body & mind” connection

Positionality

Positionality is about the awareness of one’s role or position in a community/group. I use “self in group” to indicate “positionality.” Like the code “connections,” the code “positionality” was demonstrated and reflected in and through most of our improv games (see Table 13).

Table 13

Positionality

A type of human interaction	Positionality (self in group) Self: A; Group: G
Diagramic expression
Quotes	<p>Xiao Xin (Prefer to be a follower): “As a leader, I find it difficult to meet my own standards or others’ expectations. As a follower, with relatively lower expectations from self and others, I can dutifully finish my job; and I help others if I have extra time and energy, which gives me a great sense of accomplishment.”</p> <p>Da Lin (Used to prefer to be a leader): “Everybody has the desire for power and a leadership position. It is in our nature as human beings. But, because of some constraints in reality, we are forced to be in a compliant position.”</p> <p>Guo Li (Prefer to be a leader): “I think I have something to offer to the group.”</p> <p>Xiao Si (Either a leader, or a follower): “If I were a leader, I will be a considerate one; but lacking in authority maybe.” “As a follower, I sometimes want to repel, but more often comply, for the sake of the group interest.”</p> <p>David (neither a leader nor a follower): “If playing with friends, I am happy to be a leader. In a working scenario, I normally don’t want to participate—meaning neither a leader nor a follower... When writing academic article, I prefer ‘looking for help’ to ‘cooperation.’”</p>
Literal explanation	Positionality is the awareness of one’s role or position in a community/group.

Agency

Agency is defined by me as recognizing one’s potentials in affecting self and others. I use “I & you/others” to indicate “agency.” The issue of “agency” was frequently discussed during our group sessions but mostly I seized the opportunities to bring up “agency.” One of my roles as the lead researcher was to raise questions/challenges and promote actions. I created and categorized 10 agency-related concepts which could be loosely categorized as unrealized agency. In the subsequent sessions, we focused on promoting and exercising protagonistic agency in praxis (see Table 14).

Table 14

Agency

A type of human interaction	Agency (I & you/others)	
Quotes	<p>(1) A wished-for agency Da Li: “I wish I could have an opportunity to be a leader”</p> <p>(2) An intimidated agency Da Li: “Due to the formation (more lectures) and/or the size of the classrooms, in China, generally speaking, students are lacking in a sense of participation or responsibility... To use myself as an example, I tend to have a lot of self-doubt and hesitation. I often don’t feel confident enough to share my answers/thoughts. But then, after the teacher has announced ‘the correct answer’, I would regret not believing in myself.”</p> <p>(3) A powerless agency Qi Li: “I wish I could do something for poor people like that old lady. But seemingly I don’t have enough power.”</p> <p>(4) A not-yet named agency Angie: How to say agency in Chinese in our context? Qi Li: Institute? Da Li: Let me check the dictionary... ‘act on behalf of someone.’ Angie: No. At this moment, the only Chinese term I can think of that close to the meaning of agency I am talking about is “individual’s conscious initiative”—a Marxist concept. To me, we need agency if we want to keep our decency as human beings.</p>	<p>(5) A veiled agency—a follower’s role Angie: “What are the responsibilities of a follower (a student in a classroom setting)? Should a follower act and think like a leader too? What are the possible downsides of being a follower in its purist sense?”</p> <p>(6) A collective agency Angie: “I used to feel powerless all the time. But now, I believe in the power of real collectivism. We hold each other’s hands and struggle together. We are not facing the world as one person anymore. We are a powerful group.”</p> <p>(7) Agencies in different positions Qi Li: “The first scene in your dream reminds me of a topic in one of our classes—we talked about how leaders persuade people using public speaking skills.” Angie: “A leader needs skills and charisma. But audiences should always grasp the skill of critical thinking if they don’t want to be manipulated.”</p> <p>(8) A critical agency: Be the change Angie: Worshiping authorities, especially Western authorities. The field of education still has a lot of space to grow. Therefore, David, why not take responsibility to be part of the effort to develop the field? Guo Li: Next time, I will quote David.</p> <p>(9) A metaphysical agency Da Lin: “If the present is like a dot, and theoretically we could go any direction, what is the meaning of the past with respect to the present, or the future?” Angie: “Therefore, we need to find our authentic voice, so that we don’t get dragged by unfiltered chances and phenomena. Your thinking is very relatable to my other movie—Butterfly Effect. There is no a perfect story. Chances are we will make mistakes and wrong choices, per se. But we are capable of reasoning, reflecting, and loving. That constitutes a meaningful life for me.”</p> <p>(10) An innate agency Angie: We have to treat each other with dignity because as human beings, we are self-conscious. What is the point of having consciousness if we don’t use it critically?</p>

Literal explanation	Not-yet realized or not-yet named agency (brought up by participants)	Agency awareness (brought up by Angie)
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I categorized and named the above seven types of human interactions not to label my participants, but to make these types of interactions visible. In naming them, we can conduct critical examinations of them and open up spaces and possibilities for more forms of human interactions to take place. My next step was to further analyze the nature of the seven types of interactions, while juxtaposing them with the components of protagonistic agency (see Table 15):

An “other-referencing” identity and “views of life” could be categorized as forms of narratives. The narratives of my participants’ in the first three sessions were by-and-large “non-dialectical” or “isolated” narratives.

The combination of intuitive connection and critical consciousness is a magical formula to praxis. Many of the improv games are exercises that make beautiful intuitive and “here-and-now” connections. Intuitive connections are the catalyst and the lubricant to praxis. Engaging praxis means to critically examine our behavioral principles, to connect our mind with our body, and to connect theory with practice.

“Positionality” and “agency” are related to intentionality. Be aware that the types of agencies our group had touched on were still dominantly unrealized agencies. When we are aware of our “positionality” and “connections”, we are embodying and honoring a collective spirit (a good cause). “Counternarratives” was a not-yet touched element in the first three sessions. All seven types of interactions are different manifestations of students’ voice. Our next goal was to let the students’ voice be heard beyond our research group, through performing our voice in the final show.

Table 15

Juxtaposing the Components of Protagonistic Agency and the Various Types of Interactions

Components of Protagonistic Agency	Corresponding Types of Interactions
Narrative	An “other-referencing” Identity (Nondialectical narratives) Views of life (Isolated narratives)
Praxis (connecting body and mind; connecting theory and practice)	Behavioral principles (Not-yet problematized practices) Connections (Intuitive and “here-and-now” practices) Critical consciousness (Actions needed)
Intentionality	Positionality Agency (Not-yet realized agency)
A good cause (a collective spirit)	Positionality Connections
Critical consciousness	Critical consciousness
Counternarrative	(Not yet touched upon)
Student voice	All seven types of interactions

Now, I can partially answer one of my sub research questions—How my primary participants articulated their identity and life experiences and reflected on their agency and positionality as protagonists in their lives? During the first three sessions, my participants (and I) demonstrated the above seven types of interactions to articulate our identity, life experiences and agency. In subsequent sessions, we demonstrated the possibilities of embodying protagonistic agency in various theatrical stages.

The Fourth Playbuilding Session: Case Study on Three Themes

The group gathered in the morning on the university campus field and played four games: camera above, Colombian hypnosis (the group version), and Trust Falls. After, we went back to my rented apartment and conducted three case study on three chosen themes.

The theme for case study 1 was “small group discussion and student presentation as a classroom organizing strategy.” During the second half of our first playbuilding session, three of

my female participants (Guo Li, Da Li, and Qi Li) asked about the possibility of rearranging our session schedule. Guo Li explained that her time became more scattered because of our 3 times per week schedule. She shared her frustrations with the presentations she was required to make in her classes throughout the year. I therefore made time to listen to the requirements for their presentations and to respond to their grievances. This led to a long conversation about the students' heavy homework load and the structure of their classes. During this session, we shared grievances and proposed action plans to address this situation.

The second case study topic was “the dialectics of failure.” When the group played games together, Xiao Xin often worried about failing. She expressed her nervousness about failing in front of others and feeling embarrassed. I introduced the “policy” of cheering for mistakes. Qi Li expressed that she really loved the positive attitude our group had demonstrated toward mistakes; and wished people could tolerate other's mistakes like we did in the games. The group decided to discuss the phenomenon of failure from different perspectives. We, therefore, named the theme as “the dialectics of failure.”

Our third case study topic was based on Da Lin's personal account regarding “perform or hide” in various situations. The first case study was conducted as one big group. For the purpose of efficiency, we randomly formed two small groups, with each group working on their own topics simultaneously.

I adopted a case study question prompt (Weigler, 2001) to engage in deeper discussions for all three case study topics (see Table 16). Weigler's (2001) question prompt is a playbuilding topic investigation strategy that carries the potential to promote protagonistic agency by challenging participants to critically problem-pose issues they are facing and struggling in solidarity with their peers. All three case studies turned out to be a formative opportunity for our

group to challenge opinions, philosophies, and practices. It also became a place of praxis and solidarity where we collectively challenged and encouraged each other to be critical and courageous.

I applied the dramaturgical coding method (Saldaña, 2016) for the three case studies. The structure of dramaturgical coding method (objectives, conflicts, tactics, attitudes, emotions, and subtexts) aligns with the components of protagonistic agency (e.g., problem-posing, critical thinking, awareness of positionality, and struggling in solidarity to make changes). The full transcript for the three case studies, dramaturgical codes, and the corresponding components of protagonistic agency are presented in Appendix D.

Table 16

A Case Study Question Prompt

Questions we might want to ask, when studying topic X
How does X start?
What makes X continue?
What leads people to let X continue?
What gets people to do something about X?
What changes people's minds about X?
What stops X?
What divides people over X?
What unites people over X?
What else do we need to know about X?
Where can we go to get more information?
Male and female's different or similar attitudes/standards toward X

The ability to problem-pose, take control of one's narratives and create counternarratives are key elements that define protagonistic agency. Throughout our case studies, my group members demonstrated critical thinking as a praxis of self-reflexivity by engaging in self and social awareness; assuming an historical perspective; analyzing the dialectical relationship between knowledge and lived experience, between a means and a goal, between a negative reaction and a proactive action (or different forms of agency), and between people and the

environment in which they reside. We paid close attention to gender stereotypes; challenged ambiguous beliefs, as well as our taken-for-granted daily behaviors; treated the personal as political; named our enemies (such as negative reinforcements in life; the hegemony of standard answers) and critically reflected on our cultural practices and the nature of “wearing masks.” We experienced the power of story-sharing, empathy-building, and the forming of a collective spirit. The prompt helped directing our conversations to be problem-driven and action-focused. When I analyzed data generated in the three case studies, I marked the 10 problems posed by our group, and 11 stories²⁶ shared by group members. Below is the list of the problems posted by the group.

Problem 1 (Case Study 1): How do you deal with lazy teachers and lousy students’ presentations in a classroom? Action plans proposed by the group included: serious attitude from both sides; valuable discussion topics; improve students’ presentation skills with the teacher’s help; a teacher with a huge repository of knowledge is needed to offer substantive feedback; well-prepared students; a group of people on a similar academic level, with shared goals and standards. One group member shared her story (Story 3) of some positive group discussion experiences and analyzed some possible reasons behind her positive classroom experience—a manageable class size; well prepared presenters and audience members; everyone in the classroom has to speak.

Problem 2 (Case Study 1): How to inspire each other to be serious? Some group members believed that sincerity could be felt between presenters and the audience.

Problem 3 (Case Study 1): How to guarantee the quality of the shared information? Some group members believed that we need to connect knowledge to our lived experiences, because

²⁶ I marked all 11 stories in Appendix D.

we are the experts on our lives. Besides, if the information is valuable to the presenter, it should be inspirational for the audience.

Problem 4 (Case Study 1): How do we deal with a teacher's "short-lived enthusiasm" and some lazy students? The group agreed that a discouraging teacher often discourages students from making further inquiries. Some group members shared a story (Story 1) of a failed collective action plan. The class once had one student representative to raise the concern to the teacher. However, the student representative was not brave enough to grab the teacher's attention. The action attempt was failed right there.

Problem 5 (Case Study 1): There are more events available for the participation of undergraduate students. While the life of a graduate student is more isolated with only small personal circles. The question raised was: Any grassroots activities in the past? The group came up with some preconditions for grassroots activities, such as, individual initiatives are essential to any bottom-up activities, playing together helps in forming a group spirit, empathy building when playing together is essential, and a relaxing and trust atmosphere helps each individual to express herself.

Problem 6 (Case Study 1): Will you be the initiator of a change? One group member shared a story (Story 2) of one failed initiation of a group activity. She thought one reason behind her failed initiation was that people are not interested in group activities and they don't see the point or the value of participation. The group came up with some preconditions for a collective action: A sense of belonging leads to a sense of responsibility, a shared external resistance or a shared goal, and recognizing the importance of the central issue.

Problem 7 (Case Study 2): How we can decrease a sense of failure? The group shared the following advices of wisdom: know that failure could be just a phase; invest less emotion to your

goal; overcome other's opinions; our long-term goals are our ultimate drive after failures; always reshape our goals; if my failure affected others, focusing on taking action to resolve the problem.

Problem 8 (Case Study 3): The group problematizing a one-dimensional evaluation standard, because a multidimensional standard could lead to the expansion of one's potentialities. And, we need to pay more attention to the positive aspects of others and never feel shy to compliment others.

Problem 9 (Case Study 3): Under what kinds of circumstances will a person perform in the classroom? The group proposed the following conditions: a supportive indication for action (a nice, patient, and low status teacher who needs students' help), an internal urge for action (the protagonist wishes to help out), and another external push for action (such as a role model).

Problem 10 (Case Study 3): How to change people's minds about performing? The group thought of the following strategies, such as, being the changing agent in an environment; cultivating a healthy educational culture (i.e., positive reinforcement); and working on reshaping some of our traditions. Da Li shared the positive reinforcement she felt in a classroom setting (Story 10).

When one group member raised some real-life problems, and the group proposed some action plans in an ideal world. An ideal world means an imagined world within which there is no specific protagonist, nor a detailed context evolved. Still, storytellers could be inspired by the ideas proposed in an ideal world and decided to share some related stories. For instance, stories 1, 2, 3 and 10 were shared when the group was discussing on some proposed problems. A story sharing moment is a moment of forming and reforming group dynamic. When one person in a group started to share some stories, the rest of the group members stood together alongside the person who was struggling, and proposed action plans then and there for the storyteller (or the

protagonist in the story). Protagonistic agency needs protagonists and their stories. Below are some of the stories some of the group members had shared as a way of building relationships, forming empathy, and taking control of one's narratives.

Story 5: Jia Lin shared a personal story of failure with the following conclusions: very often, a sense of failure is only a feeling of disappointment; an experience of failure is context based, with the nature of temporality. The group applaud Jia Lin (as a form of positive reinforcement) and showed an affirmative attitude through making a philosophical analysis on Jia Lin's story.

Story 6: Xiao Xin told a personal story in which neither self-expectations nor others' expectations were fulfilled. The group conducted a series of philosophical analyses on failure to help the storyteller/protagonist better understand the concept of failure. For instance, the group philosophically distinguished two different subjects of failure: "I think I failed" or "YOU think I failed." Therefore, the protagonist's attitude toward failure matters. Some other philosophical analyses on failure included: failure as a temporary concept (i.e., disregard those insignificant failures in the process of approaching the long-term goal); self-expectation, not external reaction, as a trigger to a sense of failure; failure as a concept with developmental phases (i.e., our understandings of failure changes).

Story 7: David shared his frustration in finding patterns in his emotional responses to people. The group tried to ease his frustration through showing an affirmative attitude (i.e., to recognize David's sense of responsibility).

Story 9: Da Lin shared an experience of embarrassment, which has become a stigma in his life. He regarded an imperfect performance as a source of embarrassment. The group linked

personal issues with the bigger environment—Personal is political; and associated Da Lin’s mentality with our one-dimensional and binary (good or bad) system of evaluation.

Story 11: Qi Li’s confessed: “As a matter of fact, I hide because I think I am not good enough to be in a position of a leader. I worry that I am not competent. Therefore, I decide to hide myself.” The group demonstrated a group spirit and an empowering moment through encouraging Qi Li to perform when she wishes to; and offering strategies to ease Qi Li’s feeling of incompetency: looking for help when needed; enduring a short moment of embarrassment if necessary, because things will get better; focusing on the tasks, not others’ opinions.

This case study session was the highlight of the first four sessions; the group members demonstrated protagonistic agency through critically reflecting on and taking control of the narratives about their lives, through letting their voices be heard and exchanged, through problem posing and contextualizing taken-for-granted ideas and status quos; and through demonstrating mutual trust and support among the group members (see Table 17). When they were critically engaging with each other, they shared one group identity, because in spirit, they were holding hands and leaning on each other, at times.

Table 17

Juxtaposing the Components of Protagonistic Agency and the Patterns in Case Study

Major patterns	Nature of the Patterns	Components of PA
The group raised 10 problems	Problem-posing & action-seeking	Praxis & student voice (within our group)
The group shared 11 stories	Taking control of one’s narratives	Narratives & counternarratives

In sum, our bodies and minds were present, when we had shared problems to tackle; and when we collectively struggled to propose action plans. Our personal and shared narratives were present when we listened to each other’s stories, and (re)constructed and transformed them into our shared stories and memories. Our hearts were present, because heartfelt stories, more than

abstract thoughts, built empathy and connected us. Our voice was present; and we became each other's responsive listeners. Our imagination and solidarity as counternarratives were present. Because all of the above, our group spirit was present. No one was isolated; we were fully present with each other there and then. Therefore, we became the protagonists of our stories. We were embodying protagonistic agency. The next challenge was extending our voices to the public level. In this research context, it meant preparing and performing our collective theatrical creation.

CHAPTER 5: THE COLLECTIVE PROCESS 2—PERFORMATIVE POSSIBILITIES

Becker (2014) stated:

Once the journey has begun, the ground one walks on, the distance one travels, becomes a mirror for the evolution of one's own spirituality. This is an important element of pilgrimage—while walking, journeying, traveling to a designated place, the act of getting there is as important as the arrival. (p. 121)

During the first four sessions, my participants were research participants, game players, storytellers, responsive listeners, critical thinkers, and problem solvers. As a team, we generated themes, researched those themes, and, most importantly, demonstrated protagonistic agency in the three case studies. From the fifth session through our final performance, my participants took the adventurous roles of improv game facilitators, theatrical improvisors, and theatre performers.

The Fifth Playbuilding Session: A Detour Session

Meeting International Critical Pedagogues—The Power of Role Models

During our fifth session, I arranged for my participants to engage in conversations with professors from the United States and Europe who participated in the critical pedagogy conference on our campus in China (see Figure 2). I wanted my participants to meet with international professors for two reasons. First, many of the invited speakers are my professors and friends who have played an essential role in shaping my academic and life trajectory. They are my role models I wanted my participants to see and feel the genealogy of my intellectual development, to better understand my philosophical and ethical positions. Secondly, these professors are both academic teachers and activists in their communities and. It could be a great opportunity for my participants to see and hear what it looks like to practice agency in social arenas and transcend personal agency for collective or public agency.

Figure 2. Meeting international critical pedagogues.

Although the meeting with international critical pedagogues was not one of our scheduled research sessions, my participants could benefit from an experience of embodied pedagogy and the opportunity to have quality conversations with international scholars. The conversations between my participants and my role models were both authentic and touching. We shared stories, we sang, and we cried. When our professors had to leave China, many of my participants came to say goodbye. They exchanged gifts, and some cried again. Those friendships and interpersonal connections are precious, inspirational, and real. We are who we are because of our reflexive experiences; we are who we are because of those people who gently and lovingly touch our bodies and our minds.

An Improv Game Workshop Between the Fifth and the Sixth Playbuilding Session

I was invited to conduct an improv game workshop with a class of master's-level education students. Some of my research group members (Qi Li, Guo Li, Xiao Si, Xiao Xin, and Jia Lin) joined me. They helped me to facilitate the workshop and participated in it too. We played a few improv games with students and the class generated some fascinating discussions. After the workshop, two female students from the class approached me to chat privately. I was

deeply moved by the level of trust my group and other students had shown me. The improv workshop presented at least three important opportunities for the research participants:

Experiencing a change of the role, from a participant to a facilitator: I invited my research group to join me and assist me in this workshop. Five out of eight members made it to the workshop. For the group members who went to the workshop, their roles shifted from participant to facilitator. This was a dramatically new experience for them. Since all my participants are in teacher training, it made sense for them to have more instructing experiences in the classroom.

Experiencing side coaching improv games in a real classroom setting: The group members witnessed how the games were conducted in a real classroom setting. They were able to hear first-hand responses from the students. Those experiences could benefit them if they wished to incorporate improv games in their future classrooms.

An opportunity to debrief (and critically reflect on) the workshop: In the workshop, we played one of my favorite games “I am a tree”. It is a game that brings awareness to positionality, empathy, and agency.

Game description (I am a tree): The group forms a circle. The first volunteering participant starts in the center with a pose saying, “I am a tree.” The second volunteering participant approaches the first volunteer, also with a pose, which represents the object the second participant is about to offer, and adds, “I am a ____.” The offer could be related to the tree in any fashion. A third volunteer will join the previous two with a pose and say, “I am a ____.” The object they offer adds to the first two participants’ offerings. The three objects/persons on the stage can form various relationships. All the students stand in a circle and decide if they want to hear a story about the three objects. The three objects will make improvised conversations using first-person pronouns if the students decide they want to hear a

story. If the students do not want to hear a story, the first volunteer chooses another other player to join the inner circle. The one left in the middle keeps their original offer and pose. Another volunteer comes to the stage to make an offer in relation to the first one. This process repeats itself until there are no more volunteers or time.

Like the rules of the game “I am a tree”, things in life happen in a specific space and time and within the web of relationships. Through dealing with various relationships, people shape and reshape their identities, generate and regenerate meanings. “I am a tree” is a fascinating game to play because each player has to look at their role in relation to two other players and the stage dynamics keep shifting as players rotate in their improvised positions.

I did not record the workshop as it was not part of our official research sessions. The game “I am a tree” generated very intriguing class discussions during the workshop. I wrote a debriefing journal surrounding the class discussions of the game, and shared my journal with my research group the day after the workshop:

During one particular round of the game (I am a tree), Qi Li, Xiao Si, and Guo Li played a little girl (Qi Li), the little girl’s umbrella (Xiao Si), and another naughty kid (Guo Li). The story begins: The naughty kid took the umbrella away from the little girl. The little girl did not know what to do but squatting on the ground and saying, “I am so pitiful.” After realizing that the little girl will not do anything, the umbrella began by questioning the naughty kid, “Why did you grab me”? After that, the umbrella paused and turned around to face the little girl, “Why don’t you take me back”? After the game, players reflected upon their roles and thoughts in the games. Xiao Si expressed that as an umbrella, she couldn’t help but feeling sorry for the little girl’s misfortune. Simultaneously, she felt angry about the little girl’s weakness.

Based on my previous observations of Qi Li, she tends to compromise for the benefit of others or the general public. I have seen this side of Qi Li repeatedly during our Playbuilding sessions and outside of our research sessions. Therefore, I commented in the class, “Qi Li played a girl who does not know how to fight for her rights.” Qi Li nodded.

My interpretation of Qi Li’s performance and personality might seem somewhat arbitrary for the rest of the students who don’t know my relationship with Qi Li. A female student in the class challenged my implications of the game with Freudian terms of Id, Ego, and Super Ego. She pointed out that we are all adults. We fake it when we play. Therefore, for her, the game could never reveal our Id.

In retrospect, I should have made it clear that the game was not designed to trick any participants into revealing their Id. I was not intended to criticize or judge anyone either. What we intended to talk about and reflect upon were different relationships we have presented spontaneously. I did express my impressions towards a few participants with whom I have established some level of mutual trust. But the rest of the students in the workshop did not know that. They might feel sympathetic towards those who were “judged” by me publicly. The incident served as a lesson for me.

Back to the workshop, I responded to the female student: It is okay to perform. We all perform daily, with our masks on. The point in life is not whether we are performing or not, but how to perform well in this show called life. For instance, how to build and maintain relationships; and how to know ourselves in those relationships. I had a period when I persistently and wholeheartedly searched for my Self, very often in a metaphysical realm. Then I realized that the deeper I was digging, the further I felt lost. Then, I shifted

my strategy: searching for Self and the meaning of existence with others. To me, at this stage in my life, it is not about “to be or not to be”; but about how to do.

Towards the end of the workshop, we talked about liminality and creating a liminal space. I stated that we are always in the process of becoming—each moment contains the elements of the past and fosters possibilities of the future; each moment could be a new start. My philosophy is that changing is absolute; stillness is relative. However, we each form our unique life philosophies based upon our life experiences. What we can do is to be truly conscious of our lives.

When we are in a new or unfamiliar environment, or when we are on stage, disguise is often necessary. However, the costume or the mask one puts on to allow the person to lose self-consciousness for a bit—You are not you, but the character you are playing now. In this sense, disguise becomes a form of liberation. You can discover yourself through a disguise. We are consciously pretending, yet, unexpectedly, we encounter realness. There exists realness in pretending. If you want to discover yourself, be vulnerable when you are in a somewhat protected environment.

Even though it was not a perfect workshop, I knew that I did not disappoint the class when two female students from the class approached me and wanted to talk to me individually. They believed that I would be able to understand them and their languages. The day after the workshop, one of our group members contacted me as well. We chatted for a few hours.

After I had debriefed the workshop on Wechat, the three players I mentioned in my journal offered their own interpretations. Below is our online chatting:

Qi Li: In a game, we have to react in a split second—we don't really have the time to hide. I wanted to express this in the class last night, but the female student looked a bit shy, so I did not say anything.

Guo Li: Indeed, I did not have time to think of how to act at all. It was spontaneous for me. And the spontaneous reactions are most authentic.

Xiao Si: My interpretation is that both Id and Super-ego were revealed there. For instance, when I saw Qi Li squatting on the floor, I really wanted to protect her. It was my Super-ego that urged Qi Li to grab the umbrella back.

Angie: If one cannot even argue for her rights in a playful game, how can we expect the person to act or even to argue for his or her fellow people's rights in real life? The truth is we need to practice our courage and train our bodies for real fights in life.

It was a great opportunity for us to reflect on the nature and the power of our games. For instance, how a game can possibly reveal who we are in relation to others? And how brave we are by willing to play an improv game and showing vulnerability in front of the whole class. My participants demonstrated their bravery and their agency.

The Sixth Playbuilding Session: Improvising and Writing our Script/Vignette

In this session, the group turned our ideas and stories into theatrical forms. We watched a vignette called Pressures created by Joe Norris's mirror theatre team. The short vignette is about the competing narratives in the minds of two young people who are contemplating physical and psychological pressures for sex. The vignette incorporated body sculpting as a theatrical form. After watching the vignette, I introduced an improv game called "Sculpting" to the group. The group could choose whether to use this game to create their theatrical form. Here is the game description: Players work in groups with some player acting as the sculptures and the remaining players acting as sculptors. The sculptors shape the sculptures into a statue that reflects some aspect of the concept under discussion. Sculpting, as a improv game (or a theatrical form), offered the group a powerful tool to use their bodies instead of only words to demonstrate and embody power relationships. Our words often dominate our ways of expression. When we have to be quiet, we are forced to use our bodies and facial expressions to demonstrate relationships.

Group 1 (Guo Li, Xiao Xin, Xiao Si, Jia Lin) cocreated three scenes, using two theatrical forms: sculpting & realistic scene problem play (Norris, 2009).

Table 18

Group 1: Improvising on Power Relationships and Mutual Expectations Between Teachers and Students

Group 1 Sculpting Power Relationships	Pictures of Each Group Member's Creation
<p>Round 1: Xiao Si, as the sculptor Xiao Si asks Jia Lin to sit in a chair with her legs crossed, while holding a cup of tea. Guo Li, as a student, stands in front of the teacher, with her body bending forward and her hands held together in front of her body.</p>	<p>Revealed power relationship: A respectful and nervous student</p>
<p>Round 2: Xiao Xin, as the sculptor Xiao Xin ask Xiao Si (the teacher) to raise up her chin and show an expression of self-approbation. Xiao Xin is showing Xiao Si the kind of expression she wants on the teacher's face. Xiao Xin asks Guo Li (Shi-Jie) to smile; and asks Jia Lin (Shi-Mei) to snicker. Jia Lin: Why snicker? Xiao Xin: Here is the plot: Shi-Jie went to talk to the teacher. The teacher shows disdain towards the Shi-Jie. Meanwhile, Shi-Mei always finds it difficult to respect Shi-Jie. Jia Lin: Competition within a Shi-Men? Xiao Xin: Exactly. Are we clear now? Jia Lin: Is the competition really that fierce?</p>	<p>Revealed power relationship: A arrogant teacher; a disrespectful Shi-Mei</p>

Group 1 Sculpting Power Relationships	Pictures of Each Group Member's Creation
<p>Round 3: Guo Li, as the sculptor</p> <p>Guo Li asks Xiao Si (the teacher) to look away and frown. Guo Li then directs Jia Lin (Shi-Jie) to talk to the teacher, with her body bending, and smiling. Xiao Xin (Shi-Mei) nervously stands behind Jia Lin (Shi-Jie) with both of her hands in front of her chest. Xiao Xin is supposed to humbly observe how Jia Lin interacts with the teacher.</p> <p>Guo Li: No, no, no, Xiao Si, don't look down. You just frown and contemplate. Don't look at either of them.</p>	<p>Revealed power relationship: A humble Shi-Mei; a serious teacher</p>
<p>Round 4: Jia Lin, as the sculptor</p> <p>Jia Lin asks Xiao Xin (the teacher) to carry a humble and soft facial expression. Then Jia Lin tells Xiao Si (Shi-Jie) to stand beside the teacher. "You (Xiao Si, as a Shi-Jie) don't have to bend your body or anything. Just relax and be yourself", Jia Lin says.</p> <p>Xiao Si is totally relaxed in the Figure: Her head leans comfortably backwards while looking at the teacher with a big smile on her face. Guo Li, as Shi-Mei, is quite relaxed too. Everybody is smiling. The whole atmosphere is very harmonious.</p> <p>Guo Li: Is your mentor like that?</p> <p>Jia Lin: Yes. My mentor is really nice.</p> <p>Guo Li (went to Xiao Xin): Let me give my teacher a hug.</p>	<p>Revealed power relationship: a harmonious student-teacher relationship</p>

Group 1 members focused their exercises on the enfleshment/embodiment of power relationships. The first three relationships were particularly intense. When Jia Lin offered a harmonious relationship, they really enjoyed it. Guo Li's hug was not part of the sculptor's (Jia

Lin) arrangements but was spontaneous. This spontaneous act of appreciation revealed how much Guo Li appreciated this form of teacher-student relationship.

Group 1: Improvising on a scene “outside of the mentor’s office”

Jia Lin: We can make this scene: A student goes to the mentor’s office to talk about her paper. You (Jia Lin points to Xiao Si) should take a deep breath first prior to entering into the office.

(four of them starts to improvise. Xiao Si plays the student. Jia Lin and Guo Li are two teachers, because they both enjoy playing the role of a teacher.)

Xiao Si (talking with a very low voice; meanwhile, she keeps bowing to her teacher): Good day, teacher. I am thinking whether you have time to take a look at my paper. (Both Jia Lin and Guo Li start to mimic a teacher’s tone.)

Jia Lin: Haven’t we talked about it last time?

Guo Li (takes a quick look at the paper): I have told you these many times. How come you still haven’t corrected it?

Jia Lin (takes a quick look at the paper): You have already had your job secured or what? Where did you get the confidence?

Jia Lin (now plays the director): Then, two of you (she points to Xiao Xin and Xiao Si) should feel wronged. But still you have to pretend to be strong in front of your teacher. The moment you two walk out of the office, your tears burst out. Then, you will wipe your tears away quickly.

Jia Lin: Ohhh, I want to add a short scene before this scene. You thought of giving the teacher a call. But then, you thought it might be a better idea to send a text message instead. Then, the teacher texts you back and indicates that she is on a business trip. You feel so relieved.

Guo Li: We are always happy when mentors are not in town.

Jia Lin: We can then have “three days later” shown on a big screen. It will be followed by the scene we have just improvised.

Angie: The scene is so realistic. Good job! Since our teachers might not know what is going on behind that office door, or on the other side of the phone.

Jia Lin: You see, even though my mentor is extremely kind to us, when we pick up her calls, we actually still have so much respect for her. Especially, since she has been so nice to us, don’t you think we should feel...

Xiao Xin: Guilty?

Jia Lin: Yes!

Angie: You voluntarily put more pressure on yourself.

Group 1’s improvised script: “eating out with the teacher”

(Students sit around, chatting and joking.)

Shi-Xiong: Teacher is here. Sit here, teacher! What do we drink today? Beer or hard liquor?

Teacher: Let's do hard liquor today.

Shi-Xiong: Hurry up. Pour a glass of liquor for our teacher.

Teacher: Have we ordered our dishes? Let's order.

Shi-Xiong: We have made a few orders. Here is what we have now, and here is the menu. Let us know what you want to add.

Teacher: Not just me. You all choose what you like.

Shi-Xiong: We ordered chitterlings for you, teacher.

Teacher: (quickly scan through the order) Okay. Looks fine. We can always order more later. Our main theme for this gathering is to say farewell to our graduates.

Shi-Xiong: It hasn't been easy for any of us.

Teacher (holds up a glass of liquor): Those who are able to drink more. Drink more. Let's have a toast now.

Shi-Xiong: Teacher, I will pour you some water. Everyone, let's get our glasses full. Our teacher is very happy today. We should drink more. Teacher, why don't you say something?

Teacher: Let's raise our glasses. Stepping out of the campus does not mean the end of the chapter in your life. It means a new beginning. All the graduates, remember that you always have a family here. And you always have a teacher here. Come to visit often in the future. Let's drink.

Shi-Xiong: Those who have just graduated, who wants to propose a toast first? Xiao Si?

Xiao Si: We deeply appreciate teacher's love and support. I will empty this glass.

Teacher, you take it easy. (Xiao Si drinks all the liquor in her glass)

Teacher (teacher turns to Xiao Xin): Xiao Xin, I see you really like the fish. You want to propose a toast to the group too?

Xiao Xin (stands up right away with a full glass of liquor): Teacher, thank you for helping us to grow both in our academic lives and our personal lives. I will finish this glass of liquor. You drink at your own rate.

Teacher: Not just me. You should thank your Shi-Xiong and Shi-Jie as well.

Xiao Xin: Thank you all, Shi-Xiong and Shi-Jie, and everyone in our big family.

Shi-Xiong: Xiao Xin and Xiao Si are really excellent students. So do other Shi-Di and Shi-Mei in our family. They all are great!

(Xiao Xin and Xiao Si together proposed another toast to Shi-Xiong)

The scene "Eating out with the teacher" was exceptionally realistic and scintillatingly humorous. The group laughed when improvising. Because the scene was so realistic and the drinking culture in the scene is so complicated in Chinese culture, the group decided not to use it for fear of insulting our teachers. The scene would have been easily recognized as a parody of

the ritualized teacher/student ceremony designed to unite Shi-Men groups as a family reproducing the rigorous Chinese academic culture status codes.

Group 2 (Da Lin, David, Da Li, Qi Li) chose “small group discussion and student presentations in the classroom” as their topic. Below is Group 2’s unscripted discussions on the creation of the script.

Da Lin: We can do it this way. Scene 1, the teacher suggests small group discussion; Scene 2, students discussions within their group.

Qi Li: We can have two groups, in order to compare them.

Da Lin: I think one group is enough. Because having two groups perform simultaneously will be too chaotic.

Qi Li: We don’t have to use words. We can use body language. Maybe one group is very enthusiastic, the other group is less excited.

(the group silenced for a few seconds)

Qi Li: Okay, you finish your ideas first. Scene 3.

Da Lin: Scene 3 could be the student representative’s presentation. Then Scene 4.

Da Li: We can have a grouping part. For instance, if you are a student who seldom speaks up in the classroom, I might not want to be in the same group with you. Similarly, if someone tends to dominate the classroom, I don’t want the person to be in my group either. We need create some conflicts here. Then, it comes to the group discussion. Each student will respond differently.

(Da Li turns to David. David responds with a smile.)

David: I think all of your ideas are great!

(Da Li and Qi Li scream to David together): You are a typical free rider!

David (keep laughing): I mean it. You really came up with great ideas.

Da Li and Qi Li: Repeat what we have said.

David (tries to avoid the request): You’ve got great ideas. Hahaha.

Da Lin: Let’s start to create our script.

Qi Li: How about we use professor Y as a prototype.

Da Lin: Won’t that be too obvious?

David: No way!

Qi Li: We will change names in the end. What we can use is his talking style—this student made a very good point...good.

Da Lin: He might realize that a character is actually him.

Qi Li: I don’t think he will come to our performance.

Da Li: I don’t think so either. Anyway, lets finish our script first.

David (still playing our toy bird): Anybody who knows him will recognize that we are mimicking him.

Da Li: I agree.

David: You will all be dead if that ever happens. We cannot perform like this. We have to make the script much vaguer.

Da Li: How to do that?

Qi Li: Let's finish our script first. Then we will come back to it.

The process of making a drama is dramatic! Da Li and Qi Li noticed David was neither participating nor contributing to their group discussion, while they were the participants who were appointed to talk about the issue of group discussion in the classroom. The process of creating a script/vignette could be perceived as a form of unscripted life. In chapter 6, I compared the differences between an improvised performance (the process of improvising our scripts during our 6 sessions) and a scripted performance (our final performance). I presented both the improvising activities and the improvised scripts in this section. Compared to some of the group members' attitudes toward the casting process (in the seventh session), each group member had fun improvising aspects of their lives during our 6th session. Group 1 was so excited and decided to improvise more realistic scene problem plays.

To honor our collective creation products (scripts), I used Group 2's original script almost entirely as Act 2 in our final show. Since the script Group 2 created resembled Act 2 in our final script, I moved the script to Appendix E.

The Seventh and Eighth Playbuilding Sessions

Refine the Script, Casting, and Rehearsal

My rented apartment was approximately 2,000 square feet with three spacious bedrooms, one family room, one kitchen, one bathroom, one balcony, and one living room where we conducted most of our sessions. When we had two group activities going on simultaneously, I would have one group stay in the living room and the other group go to one of the bedrooms. I purposefully rented a big apartment for the research project though not all the rooms were large

enough for our physically activities or rehearsal. We played some of the physical games on university campus field. The apartment space constituted a limitation.

We spent the seventh session completing a line-by-line review of the script in my rented apartment. Neither the seventh nor eighth session, the casting day, were dynamic. We were very close to our final performance. I was a bit anxious because we did not have much time to refine our script or rehearse. Even though I felt a change in our group dynamic, I did not dig into it at the time. Some of my group members told me how they felt about our script and final performance after our final show. In this section, I included part of the transcript on casting to show the shift in the group dynamic. The focus of the transcript is on Guo Li because she has always been a straightforward young woman. I love her realness and openness. I present Guo Li's explanation of her attitude change after this transcript on casting.

Angie: Now Act 3, Scene 2, "A Students' Daily Routines." Da Li, you represent the university in the last scene. You can continue playing the same role in this scene. It's convenient.

Qi Li: Can I be the mentor?

Angie: Hold on. You are a colleague in the last scene. You can be one of the professors in this scene. You have two lines. Shi-Xiong and Shi-Jie are the "cruel" characters. Jia Lin?

Jia Lin: Throw me all of those characters. (Everybody laughs). After this show, I might lose all my classmates. (joking manner) (the group laughed really hard)

Angie: It is about a student's daily routine. We still don't have a person play the student yet. Who has not been assigned a role yet?

Qi Li: Guo Li.

Angie: Guo Li, you play the student? In Scene 2, you stand in the middle and will be pulled from all directions. In Scene 3, you will have a long monologue.

Guo Li: (reading the script) Ahhhh, I don't want to play (leaned back with a pretended crying tone)... Okay... (showed a sign of quandary, pouted lips & frown)

Angie: Aren't you love performing?

Guo Li: (Ha ha) I can't... (leaned back again)

Angie: Acting! Not you! You are the actor! Okay, Guo Li has the role now. Don't worry. Our mentor won't show up that day. (Note: Guo Li and I share one mentor)

(We continued to assign some small roles. Guo Li kept looking at her phone and quiet)

Angie: Sister, are you sure that you can play the student role?

Guo Li: (nodded with an uncomfortable smile)

Angie: Feel reluctant or not?

Guo Li: It's okay (low voice with her eyes still on her phone)

Angie: (in a joking manner) Whoever don't want to take the role you have been assigned. Let me know. You can switch with Da Lin. (Ha ha)

Da Li & Qi Li: He will graduate soon anyways. (Ha ha)

Angie: Qi Li, can you be the student? (Qi Li looks at me, with no words) No?

Qi Li: (quietly) Eitherrrr-wayyyy.

Jia Lin: (with a high volume) I will be the student. I don't care. If you feel reluctant with a character, I can take it.

Angie: (Ha ha) You were the cruel one in the last Scene; now you are the poor one. (Ha ha)

Eventually, Jia Lin took the role of the student (in *Act 3, Scene 2*), who delivered a serious of critical questions. One year after our performance, some of my group members had a reunion with me, I asked the group to offer critiques of our collective creation process and product (our final show). Guo Li confirmed that her attitude towards our collective project changed toward the end of our group research sessions. Below is a part of our conversation:

Guo Li: First of all, I prefer humorous ways to deliver critiques. Another thing which was hard for me at the time was I recognized my own words in our script—either my actual words, or my behaviors. It was hard to accept. When we were chatting in our sessions, I totally forgot the fact that it was a research project. Later, when we took my words out to perform, I really felt uncomfortable, I felt like I shared too much in our group, I totally exposed myself.

Angie: Actually, many of us shared many heartfelt stories, such as Xiao Si and Xiao Xin. But in the end, I did put an emphasis on your stories.

Guo Li: I saw myself in the show, which made me really uncomfortable. Toward the end, you might have noticed that I was not very enthusiastic. After seeing the script, it was not the kind of script I had imagined. Besides, I clearly saw myself in it. At that moment, I suddenly realized that it was research; not just a chatting group.

Angie: Did we misinterpret your stories?

Guo Li: The point was not whether they were misinterpreted or not. There was one particular line that really struck me. I was talking about the resistance I experienced when choosing to pursue a higher degree. One line was like "look, I am in a rather good space now." Then, in the bracket, the description was something like a proud smile.

Angie: What was wrong with the line and/or the description?

Guo Li: It was like looking at myself from a third person's perspective.

Da Li: Was it because the attitude we described or the image we created was not very flattering?

Guo Li: A little bit. But I did feel happy and proud at the time. But I have already passed that state. Then when I heard others playing me, I felt that the person did not get me right.

Angie: Why did you not tell me at that time? We designated one entire session (our 7th session) to go through our script line-by-line. We all had to proof each line. For some weird reason, I did not video/audio record that day's session.

Guo Li: I remember that session felt really slow. Toward the end of the session, we barely had any enthusiasm. We probably all had some concerns with the script, but it was difficult to make changes. Lacking courage or what. Did you sense it? I felt less and less enthusiastic.

Angie: I guess toward the end we were mainly working on our script and rehearsals. The final sessions were definitely not like our previous ones.

Guo Li: I remember almost everything in great detail. Because I loved our group project, so I paid great attention to everything.

Guo Li was not happy or ready to see herself as a character in the final show. She was not comfortable with the way she was presented. Following Guo Li's comments on the performance, Xiao Si made an excellent observation on the difference between an improvised and a scripted show:

Xiao Si: I have one story to share. Because my thesis defense was really important to me, I typed out each word of my prepared presentation ahead of time. It was like our script, we even put a description after a short sentence or a question mark. Therefore, when we perform it, due to nervousness or whatever reason, the actor was not in the context where the original story happened.

Angie: If you read your printed presentation word by word, you might feel awkward.

Xiao Si: I only used it to prepare and time myself beforehand. I did not even take it to my defense. I improvised that day. I felt more relaxed when I presented without my script. Similarly, when we shared our stories, we felt relaxed and our topics were free-flowing. We would have more ups and downs emotionally. Then we had to pick certain things and turn them into words. Written words are for sure less rich than our oral words in a casual setting. And when we arranged characters, we did not ask a person to perform her/his own archetype. Actors might not be able to get the real protagonists' deeper messages.

Angie: There are two gaps: between two contexts and between two protagonists. Thanks for offering your explanations.

The Final Show

Our research team completed eight playbuilding sessions and collectively devised the final show titled: *My, Your, and Our Meanings in the Making* (see Table 20). Eight of us (seven of my primary participants and I) participated in the final 2.5-hour show. The final show contained five acts with the themes and theatrical forms detailed in Tables 19 and 20. We studied and modeled the theatrical forms described in Norris's (2009) book, *Playbuilding as Qualitative Research*, where he presented examples of the vignettes his team collectively created. Norris videotaped those vignettes and uploaded them on his website. During our sessions, my research group watched and studied those vignettes together.

Table 19

Contents and Forms of the Five Acts in the Final Show

	Content/theme	Theatrical Form	Corresponding Vignettes in Norris's (2009) Book
Act 1	Intentionality & decision-making	Realistic scene problem plays; Inner dialogue (prop: pre-recorded videos)	"Are You Really Listening?" (p. 167)
Act 2	Classroom silence, sense of agency, & teacher's authority	Realistic scene problem plays; Inner dialogue Choice of characters Readers theatre (prop: folders)	"Are You Really Listening?" (p. 167) "Pressure" (p. 93)
Act 3	Mutual expectations & students' struggles	Voice collage; Sculpting/silence; Sequence; Monologue & hidden voices (props: masks & a large piece of blue silk cloth as a veil)	"I expect" (p. 141) (The group came up with the theatrical form.)
Act 4	Relationships between theory and practice or between academia and a life outside of academia	Realistic scene problem plays;	"Whose pencil is it anyways?" (p. 141)
Act 5	The discovery of new meanings in relationships	Game 1: Trust Falls Game 2: I am a tree	(p. 31) (I learned this game from Theresa Dudeck's class.)

Table 20

Examples of Some of the Theatrical Forms Adopted in the Final Show

<p>Inner dialogue: Inner dialogues indicate unspoken thoughts.</p> <p>(prop: pre-recorded videos)</p>	<p>Choice of characters: We had each student represent one character in the classroom, such as Boredom, Happy, Disdain, and Worrisome.</p> <p>Readers theatre: Reader theatre allowed us to deliver deeper self-analyses on our characters.</p>

<p>Sculpting/silence: We utilized silent sculpting to present unequal power relationship.</p> <p>Voice collage: Voice collage enable us to present a large amount of information.</p> <p>Sequence: Our team firstly presented expectations toward a student; then, we presented expectations toward a teacher. Sequence brings out multiple perspectives. (prop: masks)</p>	<p>Monologue & hidden voices: On a daily basis, we hear voices from various sources, which affect our ways of behaving or making choices. Those voices exist; but often invisible. Hidden voices allow me to condense a great amount of information into a short vignette.</p> <p>(props: a large piece of blue silk cloth as a veil)</p>

This research project was a collective creation project co-created by my participants and me. One of the ways to honor each student' voice and contributions was to make sure that the themes our team worked on were the themes that generated in our group and chosen by the group members. Due to the limit of the time, my research participants did not further develop all the

themes generated from the first three sessions. The final performance was not a presentation or representation of all the previous devising sessions, meaning the final performance should not carry the burden of revealing the minutiae or the breakdown of the whole process. Rather, the final show represented one of the final steps of a collective creation process. In Table 21 from left column to the right: a list of the preliminary themes generated from the first three sessions, the three chosen themes for case studies during the fourth session, the two themes we decided to explore and improvise during the 6th session, and the corresponding acts in the final script.

Table 21

Development of the Scene Themes

Themes Generated from the First Three Sessions	Themes Researched Through Case Studies	Themes Explored Through Improvisation	Themes Embedded in Final Script and Location
Classroom organizing strategies (i.e., small group discussion and student presentation)	Small group discussion and student presentation (case study 1)	Small group discussion and student presentation (group 2)	Act 2: Classroom silence, sense of agency, and teacher's authority
Phenomena in a classroom (i.e., silence in the classroom; dispersed responsibility; authority)			
Relationship between teachers and students (within a Shi-Men and outside of one's Shi-Men)		Power relationships and mutual expectations between teachers and students (group 1)	Act 3: Mutual expectations and students' struggles
Life choices (necessity vs. spontaneity; change vs. stability; inner drive vs. external drive; rational vs. irrational choices; legitimate or reasonable choices; meanings behind attending a graduate school)			Act 1: Intentionality and decision-making
The dialectic of failure	The dialectic of failure (case study 2)		Act 2: Classroom silence, sense of agency, and teacher's authority
Perform or hide	Perform or hide (case study 3)		Act 2: Classroom silence, sense of agency, and teacher's authority

Themes Generated from the First Three Sessions	Themes Researched Through Case Studies	Themes Explored Through Improvisation	Themes Embedded in Final Script and Location
Good student and bad student; friends, allies, bystanders, and free riders; digital devices vs. interpersonal relationship; high or low self-esteem; sex education; a leader or a follower			

We had one pre-show (as a series of flashbacks of previous playbuilding sessions) and two warm-up games for the performers and audience members. In between the acts, there were live discussions (see the script in Table 22). Toward the end of the show, we organized two improvisational games to play with the audience members. We had eight performers (see Figure 3) 28 audience members (see Figure 4) comprised of graduate students and faculty from the university, primarily from the Faculty of Education. In addition, we had our technology girl Lily and our photographer Ah Yang in the room with us.

All the names in this script are either nicknames or fictitious names; however, the primary researcher's name was mentioned at the beginning of the show. We did not assign a fixed character to each individual performer in the show because we wanted to focus on each vignette instead of each character. I was both a joker/facilitator and an actor in the show. My name is ANGIE in the show.

All the performers wore our research team T-shirt (either black or white) with our logo in the front and our slogan (A future in a play; A play in the building) on the back of the T-shirt (see Figure 5). Prior to the show, we suggested both performers and audiences wore comfortable clothes suitable for physical exertion.

Figure 3. A group picture of all the performers.

Figure 4. A group picture of the performers and the audience members.²⁷

Figure 5. The group t-shirt and logo.

²⁷ There are 34 persons in the picture. Ah Yang was behind the camera. Two audience members left early; and did not take the group picture with us. All together, we had 37 people in the final performance room.

The Script: My, Your, and Our Meanings in the Making

Table 22

Collective Creation: The Script and the Transcript of the Onsite Discussions

“My, Your, and Our Meanings in the Making”: the script and the transcript

Setting

A classroom on campus with mobile tables and chairs, as well as a LED screen, a projector, and a computer. Audience seating was arranged in a U-shape, creating an intimate performing space. To videotape the show, a video camera was set up in the middle of the “U-shape,” facing the LED screen. ANGIE walks to the center of the stage, welcoming people to the show and informing the audience about the 2 warm-up games prior to our show.

A WARM-UP GAME (FOR PERFORMERS)

ANGIE briefly explained the rules of the game.²⁸

ANGIE: We all walk into this space with all kinds of messages and emotions. One of the purposes of those warm-up games is to help us to be present in our mind and body and to feel centered.

Now, game time! —Zip, Zap, Boing, & Freak out!

After the first round of the game, the person who makes the first mistake looks down, and says “*It’s my fault.*” ANGIE talks to the group, “*Maybe we can try another attitude when one of us makes mistakes.*” ANGIE then demonstrates to the group. With a cheerful tone, ANGIE says, “*it is my fault.*” The group respond with “*Yeahhhhh*” and clap at the same time.

After the demonstration, the group begins the second round of the game. When one person makes another mistake, the group claps cheerfully.

ANGIE: How do we deal with mistakes or failures in our lives? When you “fail,” do you prefer encouragement or blame? Do you like flowy Zip to follow the flow? Or do you prefer using abrupt Zap to change the direction of the flow? Or do you like to use Boing to bounce back the direction? Or do you find Freak Out (switch positions) more exciting²⁹?

A WARM-UP GAME (FOR BOTH PERFORMERS & THE AUDIENCE)³⁰

ANGIE invites everybody to stand up in front of their seats and find a partner next to them to form a group. For the first part of the game two people form a group and alternate counting 1, 2, 3. For the second part of the game there is no counting out loud; instead, you use body language to replace 1, 2, 3, with clap, snap, and step, respectively.

PRE-SHOW

ANGIE: We will begin with our pre-show, to flashback on our previous playbuilding sessions and to reveal our group spirit.

²⁸ See Appendix C.

²⁹ Those questions served as a demo to the audience. I intended to demonstrate how our group reflected on the games.

³⁰ Very often when people attend a theatrical performance, they merely sit as spectators. In our case, the audience was informed ahead of time they would participate in games and discussions during the show. The purpose of a warm-up game with the audience was to prepare them for their participation in the performance.

“My, Your, and Our Meanings in the Making”: the script and the transcript

The group stand in a V formation, facing the audience. ANGIE stands in the middle at the forward point of the V formation.

ANGIE: My given name is Yan. Yan means Wild geese—the kind of migrant birds are very often seen as embodying the spirit of teamwork. My family name is Wang. Wang means leader. I am the initiator of the research project, and in this sense, I am the first leader in the team, or the leading goose of the group. When a group of geese fly together, the lead goose has to make the most effort, so that each goose reserves some strength by taking advantage of the airflow created by the geese in front of them.

ANGIE walks to the position of the person who is on her left-hand side. The rest of the group all shift positions accordingly. The person (JIA LIN) who was on ANGIE’s right-hand side became the new leading goose.

JIA LIN: But the leading goose will feel tired, therefore, other geese share the responsibility by taking the position of the leading goose in turns.

The group shifts position one more time. DA LI walks into the position of the leading goose.

DA LI: It is like our research team: we take turns in sharing the responsibilities at different times and in different areas.

Everybody else except for ANGIE goes back to their seats. ANGIE faces the audience and offers a brief introduction of the research project to the audience.

ANGIE: First of all, I want to offer some explanation about the research from two aspects: the research process and the research methodology. Prior to this research, I created two related pilot research projects which were completed in 2017—the first one was a pilot survey research on our students’ university experiences with an emphasis on classroom experiences; the second one was a trio-ethnography on Chinese intellectuals’ sense of social responsibilities, which was conducted with two of my friends who are alumni of our university. One of the purposes of conducting these two pilot studies was to explore the feasibility of, and to provide background knowledge for, our current playbuilding research project.

The two main goals for initiating the collective playbuilding project are related to my history as a NENU alumna. As a NENU alumna, I have my first-hand experiences and memories of being a graduate student. Secondly, through communicating with my team members as a NENU alumna, as well as with students and faculty outside of our team, I can generate conversations and collect information about our current graduate students’ experiences on campus. The process of generating conversations constitutes the content of my second research goal—to examine how a collective playbuilding project, as a participatory art-based research, could serve as a platform for us to communicate, reflect, interact, and act, and to enable participants or the group to (re)construct personal meanings, collective meanings and social meanings.

The soul of the research is on the meaning-making process. The goal is to promote critical praxis. Meaning-construction is a never-ending process. What I value most is the process, not the result. I believe all the results we have encountered in the past were dots on a three-dimensional life process model. If we look at those dots from different angles, we will see different configurations of our life trajectories. Today, what we are going to show you is merely one aspect of what we have done. It is not problematic that you were not with us the past two months, because you are here with us now sharing the same time and space. We will create our meanings together in the next two hours. The show does not start here; and it will not end here either. After our performance, you will decide whether to take something with you.

“My, Your, and Our Meanings in the Making”: the script and the transcript

In terms of the methodology, today’s performance and discussion parts are simultaneously a process of performing data, analyzing data, and generating data. Therefore, your critical input is invited and valued as an important part of the research process.

Now, each of our team members will share with you his or her reasons behind joining the research group.

Each of the performers stand in a line, facing the audience. One by one, each performer shares with the audience the reasons behind joining this playbuilding group.

DA LI: I chose to join the group because I see this opportunity as a possible way of adding some spice to my school life; at the same time, I am interested in this novel research methodology; thirdly, I want to make new friends here and better understand myself and others in this process.

GUO LI: I chose to join the group because I love acting. I see it as an opportunity to satisfy my acting urge and enjoy myself. (The audience laughs and claps hands)

DA LIN: I chose to join the group because I am interested in playbuilding. I wish to learn this methodology by experiencing it. At the same time, I want to better understand myself and improve my ability to express myself. (The audience laughs. So does DA LIN)

XIAO XIN: I chose to join the group because I want to get to know a new thing, and new friends. I want to go beyond of my own routine environment, and to observe others’ lives. I also want to amplify my advantages; and to enhance my level of self-acceptance.

QI LI: I chose to join the group because I want to reflect on and re-examine myself through sharing my own stories and hearing other’s stories.

XIAO SI: I chose to join the group because one day, all of a sudden, I found myself disliking the “collective lifestyle.” I prefer being alone. This collective playbuilding opportunity is a new challenge to me, I wish to get out of my “locked room.”

JIA LIN: I chose to join the group because firstly, I am interested in drama; secondly, I want to understand what playbuilding is; thirdly, I want to know more like-minded friends through this unique experience and broaden the scope of my knowledge system. In the end, I wish to be better understood by others and by myself.

All the performers still stand in a line and facing the audience. Each person takes one step forward when sharing.

ANGIE: We not only have expectations, but also concerns. Sharing our concerns helps us in understanding and respecting each other more.

ANGIE: I worry that our team members cannot have a reflective experience; or cannot have a self-tailored and collectively shared meaning-making process.

DA LI: I worry whether I can be truly open in the research process.

GUO LI: I worry that we might simply construct a dramatic show, but one where I cannot sense the educational significance.

“My, Your, and Our Meanings in the Making”: the script and the transcript

DA LIN: I worry whether I could be understood by other team members, and whether my opinions could be useful or effective.

XIAO XIN: I worry that in this process, I might end up amplifying my disadvantages, instead of amplifying my advantages.

QI LI: I worry that I might not be able to attend all of the research sessions due to time conflict. Besides, I worry that I might discover a new self and feel disappointed by the new discovery.

XIAO SI: Whenever I join a new group, I cannot help but worrying that I might not be able to contribute to the group efficiently. Or am I useful to the group?

JIA LIN: I worry that I might not be able to complete all the group assignments. I also worry about whether I can fully realize my value in the group.

ANGIE: We often share with each other our worries. Sharing worries does not necessarily mean showing our dark side or complaining about life; but can be indicative of courageously facing the dark side. As a group, we believe that we have to understand why we are not happy, in order to find happiness. We have to deconstruct the confusing part of our lives, in order to live our lives with reflexive consciousness and intentionality. We usually start each session with a check-in activity. We share with each other what has happened in the past week or how our moods have been. Sometimes, we talked for 2 or 3 hours. We cried together and laughed together. I cherish those moments very much—not only did we build mutual trust, but we also generated our potential themes for our play.

ANGIE: Now, performers, please put on your masks. What the group is going to share in the next part of the show does not match each individual. Some of the themes which we are going to present we have talked about during our sessions; others were collected through having daily casual conversations with people within the university community, or through a questionnaire I sent out to our students in our department last year.

All the performers put on their masks.

XIAO XIN: Almost each class adopts group discussion and presentation as a main classroom organization strategy. We have to do so many preps. Meanwhile, we all know that very often this kind of “teamwork” will end up being formalistic.

XIAO SI: Many of our dormitory buildings are under renovation, so we have to move all our belongings out. Even though we think the moving arrangements are neither reasonable, nor considerate, we couldn’t come up with any better ideas. (The audience laughs and claps hands)

DA LIN: The deadline of my mentor’s research project is approaching. All of the mentees are super busy recently.

GUO LI: I have been feeling anxious lately. I am spread so thin. I don’t see myself accomplishing anything.

QI LI: Lately I have been writing an article, I desperately need substantial suggestions from a teacher.

JIA LIN: I have been thinking how to make my graduate schooling experiences meaningful and fruitful.

ANGIE: My first hand experiences suggest that when our students are asked about certain questions that they are unable to push out of their minds, for some reason many of them are virtually unable to come up with one or two examples, nor are they able to elaborate on their true passions or interests. Therefore, I suggested that they share with each other their favorite movies, then reflect on the ideas or themes behind those movies.

“My, Your, and Our Meanings in the Making”: the script and the transcript

Performers put down their masks.

DA LIN: Kong Fu, Life is Beautiful (La vita è bella), and The Legend of 1900. I always contemplate on my own existence.

GUO LI: The Truman Show, Dangal (a 2016 Indian movie). I always wonder what true freedom is.

DA LI: V for Vendetta, The Shawshank Redemption, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. I always wonder what a good society or a perfect world would look like.

JIA LIN: Little Prince, Find Miracle in Cell No.7 (a 2013 Korean movie). I always want to figure out how to protect our innocence and purity as we grow up.

QI LI: Spirited Away (a 2001 Japanese animation movie), Rouge (a 1987 Hong Kong movie), Song of the Phoenix (a 2013 movie produced in Mainland China) I always look for a direction to live my life.

XIAO SI: Les Choristes, Coco, The Pursuit of Happyness. I always ponder on the meaning and the true value of our existence.

XIAO XIN: Hands Up! (a Chinese movie), Mr. Popper’s Penguins, Paddington. I always try to adjust my own mood and emotion.

ANGIE: Never Let Me Go; Butterfly Effect, The Curious Case of Benjamin Button. I always contemplate on the ultimate meaning of our lives.

ANGIE: You might think that we all ponder those deep existential and metaphysical concerns, such as, life, meaning, or subjectivity. I don’t know whether the members of the group were “influenced” by my strong existentialist pursuit or not, since I was the one who started the conversation about the ultimate meaning of our lives when we shared with each other our favorite movies. It is equally possible that many of us happen to share similar concerns. I experienced my existential crisis when I was doing my master’s here at our university. While a student, I once brought up my inner struggles in a classroom setting. However, I felt that I was not taken seriously. Looking back, I do think that it is essential for teachers to address all kinds of concerns during classroom encounters and to provide space for dialogical conversations to take place. For instance, we chose to continue our education or to pursue an academic life; therefore, we are here. However, is it a thoroughly thought-through choice? What do we really want from this graduate school experience? You might be surprised by how many people among us have never thought it through as thoroughly as we perhaps should have. Coming next, we are going to perform our collectively devised play, called My, Your, and Our Meanings in-the-Making. As a group, we not only shared with each other our own stories, but also stories we heard of that we felt were relevant. The show is based on true stories, but fictionalized. What we want to focus on is not each person but rather certain event or issue we care about. The purpose of delivering our messages through a play is to grab your attention, to trigger your mind, and to generate dialogue. Therefore, please feel free to speak up critically or constructively. Remember, one of the benefits of theatre is that we don’t have to take responsibilities for what we say or act. Or do we?

ACT 1: WHY ARE YOU HERE?

Freshmen meeting: all the freshmen collectively study “Mission and Graduation Qualification of Master Programs in Education.”

Scene 1: Two freshmen are chatting prior to the Freshmen Meeting

XIAO SI: Hey, let me ask you: Why do you choose to be a graduate student?

QI LI: I was qualified for admission upon recommendation. So here I am. I haven’t really thought about a specific reason behind it. What about you?

“My, Your, and Our Meanings in the Making”: the script and the transcript

XIAO SI: Upon receiving my bachelor’s degree, I was not sure what to do, some of my friends were preparing for the postgraduate qualifying exams. So, I followed them. (XIAO SI shrugs)

QI LI: Still, I experienced a lot of resistance. For instance, some friends chose Civil Servants Exams, in three years they might have been promoted. Three years in a graduate program! How many “three years” do I have? Not to mention my young and beautiful “three years.” How can I make it meaningful? I am under huge pressure too. I hope to learn more knowledge, and to be happy and satisfied. At the end of the day, I want to prove to those who had doubted me: “Look, I made the right choice”! (wearing a proud look on her face)³¹

XIAO SI: I always wonder, when we make a decision, was it an inner drive or an external motivation that matters more?

QI LI: I guess we do have to know ourselves.

Scene 2: During the Freshmen meeting

On the big LED screen, it reads: Learning Mission and Graduation Qualification of Master Programs in Education.

Our mission:

1. Cultivate a sense of social responsibility and entrepreneur spirit
2. Encourage creativity and the ability to teach and conduct academic research independently
3. Dedicate to students’ physical and mental health and growth.

DA LIN (the teacher): Good afternoon students! Today our learning emphasis is on Graduation Qualifications, which should be your biggest concern.

First of all, you have to complete all the required courses or 33 credits, with excellent scores.

Secondly, you have to write two at least twenty-thousand-word literature reviews. Besides, a report on at least 10 academic talks/presentations you have attended. Thirdly, and last but not the least, you have to finish writing your master’s theses under the supervision of your mentor.

If you want to graduate in two years, instead of three, according to school regulations, in addition to the three requirements we just talked about above, you have to have at least one academic paper published on a CSSCI or SSCI journal.

Now, let’s briefly go through the mission of our master’s program: 1. Cultivate a sense of social responsibility and entrepreneur spirit; 2. Encourage creativity and the ability to teach and conduct academic research independently; and 3. Dedicate to students’ physical and mental health and growth. Any questions?

QI LI: (internal monologue³²: Three years = 33 credits + 2 twenty-thousand-word literature reviews + a report on at least 10 academic talks/presentations + a master’s theses = Certification of Degree& Graduation. Come on! I have to finish the journey I chose, even if I should walk on my knees.)

XIAO SI: (internal monologue: How to cultivate a sense of social responsibility? Social responsibility! And healthy mental status? Are we supposed to think those through ourselves in granular detail? What are the differences between being an undergraduate student and being a graduate student?) (XIAO SI shows frowning and confused facial expression)

QI LI: (Whispering to XIAO SI) *Sounds difficult, ha?*

XIAO SI: (Hesitates; then nods to QI LI)

ACT 2: WHO ARE YOU IN A CLASSROOM?

³¹ This line of Qi Li’s is heavily based on Guo Li’s previous statement. During our group reunion, Guo Li expressed she was not comfortable with the way we presented this character.

³² Internal monologues in Acts 1 & 2 were videotaped ahead of time and short videos of internal monologues were played on the big screen during the show.

“My, Your, and Our Meanings in the Making”: the script and the transcript

ANGIE: The next act might not be a likable one. We don’t particularly like it either. However, we all think that it is important, though exceedingly difficult, to showcase some of the following moments in our classroom.

Act 2, Scene 1

This is a required course. Five students are sitting in a classroom. Each of them has a label attached on their T-shirt—BOREDOM, HAPPY, DISDAIN, WORRISOME, and NO OBJECTION. The inner monologue parts were videotaped ahead of the time; and were played on the big screen during the show.

The female teacher DA LI walks in with a syllabus in her hand.

DA LI (the teacher): Students, you are graduate students now. You are supposed to show some differences with undergraduates. Therefore, for this class, we are going to adopt the formation of group discussion and presentation. How is that? Any other suggestions?

XIAO XIN (boredom): (internal monologue: Not again! Group discussion and presentation! Each class takes the same formation. We already had many classes require groupworks last semester. So what? Nobody took it seriously. I am sure it will become formalistic as always. Wasting my time. Who will offer suggestions? Suggestions will go nowhere anyways.)

GUO LI (happy): (internal monologue: WOW, groupwork! I love it. I will take the opportunity to showcase myself. Teacher will for sure pay attention to me too.)

JIA LIN (disdain): (Scan through the syllabus) (internal monologue: Oh, I am not interested in those topics. Not my choice; none of my business.)

QI LI (worrisome): (internal monologue: Why not lectures? Now we have to share the responsibility again. So stressful!)

DA LIN (no objection): *Nope.*

DA LI (the teacher): Okay, if no comments, we are going to group up and pick a topic on my syllabus. Report to me your grouping and topic choices after.

Act 2, Scene 2

Small group discussions in the classroom

GUO LI (happy): Who want to be the presenter?

JIA LIN (disdain): (internal monologue: *I just want to see you, blah, blah blah.*)

GUO LI (happy): (internal monologue: I want to volunteer myself. But... maybe they will think I want to show off myself. I will wait and see for now.)

QI LI (worrisome): (internal monologue: whoever capable is fine for me. If I volunteered myself, and did a bad job, I might be blamed by the group.)

XIAO XIN (boredom): (internal monologue: *whatever! All the same to me.*)

DA LIN (no objection): (internal monologue: as long as I can complete the course. Nothing else matters.)

(the group members look at each other quietly for a few seconds.)

GUO LI (happy): Okay. I will do it. I plan to present it this way: First of all, ...

QI LI (worrisome): (internal monologue: Hmmm, could students really grasp the key ideas of a given topic? I still prefer teacher’s lectures.)

XIAO XIN (boredom): (internal monologue: *Okay, you do it. I can take a break.*)

JIA LIN (disdain): (internal monologue: *Errrr, when can you finish? I am hungry.*)

“My, Your, and Our Meanings in the Making”: the script and the transcript

GUO LI (happy): ... This is how I interpret this topic. Do you have any suggestions or other ideas?

XIAO XIN (boredom): It sounds fine to me. (internal monologue: You have shown so much confidence. What else do you need from the rest of us?)

JIA LIN (disdain): *perfect!* (internal monologue: *What should I have for lunch?*)

DA LIN (no objection): *I think it is great!*

GUO LI (happy): (internal monologue: It is not fair at all! I prepared everything myself. This kind of group project is totally meaningless.)

Act 2, Scene 3

The next class; presentations in the classroom

DA LI (the teacher): Students, we are going to start the class now. Which group representative wants to present the first?

GUO LI (happy): I will do. Hello everyone, the topic our group chose is ...

JIA LIN (disdain): (internal monologue: *No logic. No focus.*)

XIAO XIN (boredom): (Looking at her cell phone) (internal monologue: It is not helpful at all. If it were a lecture class, it might be more helpful to me to write an essay. Another class; no gains. You all will not see me next class.)

GUO LI (happy): Thank you for your time and attention. Any questions or suggestions?

DA LI (the teacher): The presentation is well prepared. The presenter did a very good job. Let's clap for the group's excellent work. How do you like the groupwork formation so far?

GUO LI (happy): (internal monologue: That's it? Even no feedback from teacher? I spent sum much time in collecting the materials and preparing for the presentation. How should I talk to the teacher? If I confront her directly, she might be angry with me. It might affect my final score... forget it.)

JIA LIN (disdain): (Briefly looks at the teacher, then continues playing a video game on her phone.)

QI LI (worrisome): (internal monologue: Sooooo, this is our teacher's standard? Now I know what I need to do next time when I have to be the presenter.)

DA LI (the teacher): (internal monologue: The deadline of one of my projects is approaching, I have to call in my graduates to pull our socks up. Everything is tied up with government-funded research projects—my future graduates and my professional development. I cannot be spread too thin by everything.)

(the teacher sighs)

Act 2, Scene 4

All the students and the teacher stand in a row. They each hold a folder and in turn, demonstrate their confusions and reluctance in words.

JIA LIN (disdain): I am very rational. I clearly understand that fulfilling the Graduation Qualifications enacted by the university, such as writing my papers and my final thesis are more valuable than doing other more superficial things, say, class participation. However, once in a while, I would wonder: is there anything else beyond pursuing materials and things? A subtle feeling of emptiness would occupy my heart. What am I missing here? Am I experiencing what they called “The Unbearable Lightness of Being”?

GUO LI (happy): I always like to express and perform. But at the same time, I worry that people might see me as not being humble enough. I take my studies seriously, and I am eager to hear feedback from teachers and students after my presentations. I would love to offer suggestions to my teacher. However, I don't want to challenge my teachers' authority, especially not publicly.

“My, Your, and Our Meanings in the Making”: the script and the transcript

Where does a teacher’s authority come from anyways? Is being a teacher a precondition to their authority? Or reverse? If a student is an expert in one domain, can the student be a teacher too?

XIAO XIN (boredom): I do want to study. I carry with me my own purpose when I enter a classroom. However, sometimes, the material/content the teacher offered seems irrelevant to my purpose. Not to mention the scenario when the efficiency is not valued enough in a classroom; I would choose passive participation. Here is my strategy: I start with questions; then I look for relevant materials and ways to resolve my questions.

QI LI (worrisome): Why am I afraid of speaking up in public? Am I afraid of failure? Friends helped me coming up with difference explanations to my fear: some think that, I might be more prone to consequentialism, instead of a process-oriented perspective; some guess that, if I have a relatively long-term/bigger goal, I would have let go of those small/transitory speed bumps, as long as the general direction is correct; still others attribute it to a single assessment standard, which judges a person with a binary concept of success or failure; comparatively, with multiple assessment standards, we might focus more on appreciating people from different angles or aspects, where so called “failure” could simply be seen as not good at certain things.

DA LIN (no objection): I cannot explain it. Most of the time, I don’t have anything special to say about almost anything. When a teacher mentions one theory, the most I could get will be linking it with another theory. But there is nothing to be with me. I cannot see much value in discussing or questioning that?

DA LI (the teacher): Dear teachers and prospective teacher, how do you see the roles of a teacher in a classroom?

THE FIRST GROUP DISCUSSION³³

On the big screen, there are 3 suggested discussion points:

- (1) Regarding the first act, what are the possible relationships between our graduate students’ intentionality, self-expectations in the graduate program and the degree of flexibility in their future choices. How does a university’s mission statement play a role in it?
- (2) In the second act, if you were a director, how would you want to depict our regular graduate level classroom scene? Why do many of our students choose to be quiet in the classroom? Recall the characters we have created in the show, and reflect on your behavior—are you the kind of person who tends to fit in or do you take the initiative and make the environment the way you want it to be? Why?
- (3) What does leadership mean to you, or to a group, or to our society? What is leadership?

ANGIE delivered the whole script to each audience.

ANGIE: Please go to page seven—the monologue part in Act 2, Scene 4. You might not have the opportunity to digest this part properly during the show. Now you can read this part yourself. For now, please stay on page seven and don’t keep reading. You are welcome to take the script with you after the show. You can choose to share something regarding those three points on the board or you can talk about anything that came to your mind at this moment.

SUMMARY OF AUDIENCE RESPONSE: A female graduate student (Xu), majoring in rural education, believed the 2nd act represented modern university students’ lifestyle—an unconscious and unreflective life. Xu claimed the reasons behind Chinese students lacking critical thinking are two-folded: students share half of the responsibilities; students are not motivated or encouraged to think deeper or critically—who really cares about how students feel? Xu suggested educators need

³³ This was a group discussion or reflection activity during the intermission among the actors and the audience. Group discussion is one of the strategies to involve the audience to engage in critical analysis of the show.

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pay more attention to students’ deeper needs and students’ meaning-making processes in order to cultivate students’ academic passion. Xu shared with the group her own story: in a classroom setting, she has always been an active student, an initiator, and a self-promoter. She enjoyed the sense of accomplishment and a teacher’s compliments after finishing a project excellently.

ANGIE: We need a platform to communicate on a deeper level and form trustworthy relationships such as the platform we are using now.

SUMMARY OF AUDIENCE RESPONSE: Another female graduate student expressed that after watching the first 2 acts of the show, she felt disappointed about the environment and herself. From her point of view, schools in general are not ideal places for individuals to grow and shine. She said, “I think everyone of us has our own dreams and our ambitions, either towards academia or towards life in general. However, we might not present ourselves the way we wish to present—we hide our dreams, our emotions, and our power if we perceive the environment as unsupportive or repressive. If we are in an environment that is appreciative, supportive and understanding, we will be inspired to be brave, critical, and creative. But now we don’t have the kind of environment.” She saw herself as being more negative towards life. She tended to criticize all the dark side of life—fake things or formalized things in school, instead of feeling content with what she has and the bright side of life. She became unhappy, disappointed, then gave up on making any changes.

ANGIE: It is true that we cannot re-live our past; but we can make changes at any time. The key is to be conscious of where we are and how we are; then enact on changes. Personally, I was a shy and timid girl. Then I realized that it is important to be brave and courageous. So, I started to force myself to do things and learn to be a brave girl. But how to be a brave girl and how to be a responsible citizen, I used to feel helpless because I am so small when I encounter the whole society. Over the years, I finally learned that my social responsibility has to start from my relationship with each individual. I should personally knit this net called society then I can be part of it. It is actually a process starting from an emotional interest— to be a responsible citizen and to make the world a better place, down to a rational action—knit my own network and form my own group where each member is an agent to change. You are not alone. It is not wrong to be emotional. We just need to strategically channel our emotion and turn our emotion into real power.

ACT 3: MUTUAL EXPECTATIONS

Scene 1: From students’ eyes, a teacher’s daily routine

The teacher (ANGIE) stands in the middle, surrounded by four students, one colleague, one university administrator, and one spouse. One by one they make demands of the teacher. When they are talking, they drag the teacher’s arm towards themselves.

Everybody, except for the teacher wear their masks.

XIAO SI (student 1): I hope that my mentor can help me with my paper and my publication. (while dragging the teacher towards her).

QI LI (colleague): Sometimes, I need my colleague to help me with my workloads. (while dragging the teacher towards her).

JIA LIN (student 2): I wish that my teachers prepared each class adequately, that they knew my academic interests, and that they could provide me with more productive suggestions in the classroom and with my assignments. (while dragging the teacher towards her).

DA LI (university administrator): I need my faculty to receive more grants and funds for their research projects. (while dragging the teacher towards her).

DA LIN (SPOUSE): I need my partner to share family responsibilities.

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(while dragging the teacher towards her).

GUO LI (student 3): I want my teacher to care about my daily life.

(while dragging the teacher towards her).

XIAO XIN (student 4): I wish to participate in my teacher’s research team in a meaningful way, so I can truly learn something valuable from the experience.

(while dragging the teacher towards her).

ANGIE (the teacher) uses her hands to cover her face.

Act 3, Scene 2: A student’s daily routine

JIA LIN (the student) stands in the middle, surrounded by the mentor, professor, university administrator, Shi Xuong, and Shi Jie³⁴. One by one they increasingly make demands of the student. When they are talking, they drag the student’s arm towards themselves.

Everybody, except for the student in the middle, wears a mask. The student wears a mouth cover to symbolize her sometimes silenced existence.

DA LI (university administrator): It is imperative that you turn in this form, that application, and your personal info before the midnight tonight, if any of those is overdue, students should be responsible for all the serious consequences as a result.

SHI XIONG (DA LIN): We have to set up a schedule for our mentor’s office’s daily cleaning.

XIAO XIN (mentor): Come to my office in 10 minutes.

QI LI (professor): Tomorrow we will do group presentation; each of you have to do an individual report.

SHI JIE (GUO LI): You should get this conference reimbursement taken care of today for the department. Also, take this paperwork to the administrative building on behalf of our mentor.

XIAO SI (student): Tonight, we have our roommate get-together dinner, tomorrow night is the night for our classmates. This weekend we will have a lunch gathering with our mentor and all of his students.

XIAO XIN (mentor): The deadline of this research project is fast approaching, lets pull our socks up, and get it done today.

GUO LI (Shi Jie): You are assigned to pick up a visiting professor from the airport and make sure that you are on call for the professor during the whole conference period.

QI LI (professor): I am making up lessons on behalf of your mentors now. Your academic foundations are much too weak.

XIAO XIN (mentor): Everyone in our Shi-Men has to attend tomorrow’s seminar. Absences are not easily forgiven, as you know.

DA LIN (Shi Xiong): Having meals with teachers, it is very important that you know when and how to propose a toast. We Chinese are fussy about our dinner table rituals.

³⁴ In the Chinese academy, the relationship between a mentor and their mentees is similar to a traditional apprenticeship, in which the mentee or apprentice both learns skills and knowledge from the mentor and regards the mentor as a role model. There is an old saying in China: one-day teacher, life-long father. A mentor is highly respected by their mentees. Generally, one mentor has many mentees from different academic years. Since a mentor is seen as a parent, all the are supposed to treat each other like brothers and sisters. The mentor and all their mentees form one family—we call the family “Shi Men.” Shi means teacher or teaching. *Men* means gate literally and, a family following one tradition metaphorically. All the mentees are supposed to follow the mentor’s academic tradition or trajectory. Shi Men culture is essential among graduate students. Within a Shi Men, if a mentee joined the Shi Men before you, you should call them Shi Xiong, senior academic brother, or Shi Jie, senior academic sister. If a mentee was accepted to be part of the Shi Men after you, you should call them Shi Di, junior academic brother, or Shi Mei, junior academic sister.

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JIA LIN (the student) shows signs of dizziness. She takes off her mouth cover, steps forward. The rest of the performers stand in a line behind the student, holding a blue curtain (made of a large piece of blue silk cloth) in front of their faces and upper bodies. Each of them (as anonymous voice) will respond to the student’s monologue as a voiceover.

The student starts her monologue.

JIA LIN (student): Each month, each week, and each day, I feel that my time and life are so scattered. It is really difficult to dive into studying or essay writing. I frequently feel so frustrated with my daily routines.

XIAO SI (anonymous voice): This is life. This is our society. You should learn to adjust yourself and learn from each piece of it.

JIA LIN (student): But don’t I have the right to make a choice? Don’t I have the right to say NO to some requests to better fulfill other assignments?

GUO LI (anonymous voice): Emmm, it is rather complicated—the complexity of human relationships, hidden rules, and social pressure all play a part in your daily practices.

JIA LIN (student): Hi, teacher, I have drafted a paper, could you please take a quick peek of it then give me some suggestions?

XIAO XIN (anonymous voice): Go find your own mentor. I am not responsible for you.

JIA LIN (student) hesitated. Then turned to another direction.

JIA LIN (student): Teacher, I have drafted a paper, could you please take a quick peek of it then give me some suggestions?

QI LI (anonymous voice): I have been so busy recently. I don’t have the time. Can you wait for a while?

JIA LIN (student): To whom should I go?

DA LIN (anonymous voice): Why not try your Shi Xiong or Shi Jie?

JIA LIN (student): Within our Shi Men, we do not have doctoral students. We even do not have many master’s students, and of those that we do have, fewer and fewer numbers of them are interested in academic development. What should I do?

DA LI (anonymous voice): Oh, I have an idea. Since other teachers, other than your mentor, are not directly responsible to you outside of the classroom, why don’t you take full advantage of class assignments? If you take each assignment seriously, you can certainly ask the instructor to give you suggestions and feedback. It could be a solution for you.

JIA LIN (student): Oh well, it is too late for me, I have finished all my courses. What I can do is to pass along your suggestions to those who have just entered the master’s program. To be honest, being in this huge university, what I often feel is loneliness and helplessness.

THE SECOND GROUP DISCUSSION (SMALL-GROUP DISCUSSIONS)

ANGIE: We all tend to see things from our own perspectives, which could be one-sided. That is the way we devised the second act for both parties—teachers and students. But be aware that in Scene 1, the teacher’s daily routine was written from students’ perspectives.

In our real life, how do we negotiate expectations?

In an ideal world, how do you wish to balance those expectations?

We are not in a courthouse, so there is no veridical judgement here. Please take this opportunity to think about and share with each other your concerns and struggles, or some lessons you have learned in dealing with your expectations.

Now, we will form 4 small groups. Two actors will be with six or seven audience members. After the group discussion, we will ask the two actors in each group to summarize your group discussion.

After 15 minutes of discussion, GUO LI represented her small group to share with the larger group. In GUO LI's group, one female student described an experience similar to Act 2. She sometimes felt that, after a group report or presentation, there was no adequate feedback from teachers. She could not feel the growth in the classroom, but felt overwhelmed by more and more repetitive work every day, which made her feel lost.

Another female student had a more positive attitude towards the same issue. She believed we learn what we have to learn in school; we have to know our own plans and be a self-sufficient student. Besides, she believed teachers and students can learn from each other. However, many students tend to have lower self-esteem, which is a problem.

In the end, GUO LI stated she was inspired by the female audience who held a more positive perspective. GUO LI expressed, "I want to be a self-sufficient student, because teachers are busy."

QI LI and XIAO SI represented the second group. QI LI summarized their group discussion into two points: first, they questioned the role of a Shi-Xiong or a Shi-Jie in their life; second, a professor in their group shared a story about mutual expectations. When the professor was doing her master's, she wanted to be given a Direct Admission opportunity by her mentor to continue her doctoral program without having to write her thesis or preparing for the entrance exams. For her, this could save a year and she could then graduate with her Ph.D. much earlier. However, her mentor wanted her to go through the process of writing a thesis so that she could understand the process of writing an academic thesis and double check whether she was really interested in this academic trajectory³⁵.

XIAO SI added to QI LI's summary. They talked about how to take advantage of the resources in a Shi Men. Even though many teachers are very busy, students should take initiative. Complaining can be counterproductive. We should develop students' agency. Second, we should think about what to do with our lives after all the negative feedback.

Jia Lin represented the third group. Her group discussed the mutual expectations between teachers and students. Two expectations could be both misplaced and reconcilable. Regarding classroom teaching and learning practices, the teacher's emphasis is on conducting their research projects however, students expressed wanting to learn more from teachers. The mutual expectations here are misplaced. However, the mutual expectations could be more reconcilable. For instance, teachers could help us to be a better person by being a role model themselves and offering suggestions or directions for us when needed.

³⁵ Qi Li did not share how the female faculty felt about the experience at the time of the performance. Direct Admission is a very competitive opportunity. It allows only very prolific mentors to accept one student each year without their having to take the entrance exam.

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ANGIE represented the last group. We talked about a double bind situation: if we have a utilitarian mentor who does not care about our emotional wellbeing, we will simply blame ourselves for not being efficient; if we have a caring mentor, they will only make us feel guilty, if we cannot get the work done. Two kinds of expectations from mentors, same trapped situation for students. Parents won't appreciate our feeling of being lost. For parents, they have been paying for our education for approximately 20 years, we cannot complain about anything really.

Therefore, deeper communication and mentorship among students of different academic years is essential. Don't just wait for others to come to you. Stick your hand out to others without feeling afraid of potential rejection.

ACT 4: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEORY & DAILY PRACTICES

A university classroom—a university required course on Marxist theory and practice

There are three sentences on the big screen:

Karl Marx devoted his whole life to the liberation of the humankind.

The world does not satisfy man and man decides to change it by his activity.

Changing the world does not mean that human beings have an absolute free will to do so; in this sense, human beings are the unification of regularity and teleonomy.

XIAO XIN (the teacher): “Karl Marx devoted his whole life to the liberation of the humankind.” How do we interpret this statement?

DA LI (student): Marx's fight for the liberation of mankind is magnificent and sublime. But this goal is much too farfetched for me. I don't think I can hold onto that.

DA LIN (student): What's the point of talking about humankind, if we don't even know ourselves? I think if each of us behave well, the world will be a great place to be.

QI LI (student): Can we put those people such as Marx and Che under a category of humanitarianism?

XIAO SI (student): I can certainly write in flowery language. However, that elaborate rhetoric, from a strategically advantageous and philosophically congruent position, often remains on the level of rhetoric. Those who are good at delivering flowery words, and writing theoretical speculations, are respected and favored in our society. When it comes to practice, how many of them are actually doing anything on the ground? Majority of us chose to turn a blind eye to those tricks.

ANGIE (student): If we say Marx was a great figure in our history, the revolutionary friendship between Marx and Engels was at least equally great and important. Individual contributions are often magnified to a great extent, which makes a duplication or transcendence of that greatness seem impossible. As a matter of fact, the support we can get from people around us is a precondition for so called laypeople to be extraordinary.

XIAO XIN (the teacher): For now, let's put aside this supposedly big concept called humankind, and move our conversations to our subjective initiatives. Lenin (Philosophical Notebooks, p. 213) once said, “the world does not satisfy man and man decides to change it by his activity.” However, changing the world does not mean that we have a totally free will to do so, in this sense, human beings are the unification of regularity and teleonomy. We are all familiar with those sentences through memorization and repeated testing in our university banking models of learning that have been part and parcel of our education up until now. My question here is related to how we embody critical theories in our daily quotidian existence if we actually believe in our own words? Has all our learning become reified, that is, when we attribute to our abstract ideas concrete objects or when we mistake social relationships for concrete objects, that is, when we commodify social relationships, when we turn human attributes into thing-like beings?

QI LI (student): I am not sure how to infuse theory into my daily life. The kind of connection I make is between or among different theory.

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ANGIE (student): For me, it is a dialectical relationship between structure and agency, between materiality and agency. To make it simple, it is a contradiction between What We Want and What I Want. For instance, I am a student in our university. The university in this example is “We”, and I am part of this “We.” How to see the relationship between “We” (the university) and “I” (a student)? Do I have a say when it comes to university’s missions, qualifications, or regulations? Was my opinion valued when the university makes plans for dormitory rearrangement? Do I have a right to negotiate my syllabuses or does a syllabus represent only the university’s will? Take one step back, if you were given all the rights and opportunities to make your voice heard, will you pick up my rights and fulfill my responsibilities? In other words, what keeps happening is that “I” am not part of the decision-making team called “We.” My relationship with the university can be interpreted as a material relationship between “They” (the university) and I, with graduation and degree certificates being an intermediary agent. In this market-driven economy, each person’s independency is based upon our dependence upon things/materials. This is one manifestation of what Marx referred to as alienation. The university, representing our society, wants you and I to be a person of regularity only. But what is one of the key distinctions between a human being and an animal? Animals have a more direct and passive relationship with the world (i.e., survival of the fittest). While, human beings have this unique denying and unified (or a dialectical) relationship with the world, because we want to change the world through our subjective initiatives, our intentionality, our human condition reflects a dialectical co-existence of regularity and teleonomy. Aren’t we giving up the essence of our humanity without being conscious of it?

DA LIN (student): I don’t think it is that serious. I hate conflicts! I chose to pursue my master’s degree out of my free will. If I can graduate with my degree and also my graduation certificates in three years, this confirms that I have been exercising my subjectivity and my protagonistic agency.

GUO LI (student): For me, I think that it is very important that the university communicates with students, it is as important as the regular communication between individuals. The university is responsible to us. We are supposed to be responsible to our university too. This process of mutual understanding and adjustment is a process of unifying regularity and teleonomy. It is also a way of practicing social responsibility.

JIA LIN (student): Well.... Is the sense of social responsibility a must for everyone?

THE THIRD GROUP DISCUSSION

On the screen: The three sentences for Act 4 are still there:

Karl Marx devoted his whole life to the liberation of humankind.

The world does not satisfy man and man decides to change it by his activity.

Changing the world does not mean that human beings have an absolute free will to do so; in this sense, human beings are the unification of regularity and teleonomy.

ANGIE: How many of you attended Professor Sun, Zheng Yu’s lecture a few weeks ago? Professor Sun’s lecture was titled Marxism and its Contemporary Value. He deeply believed that Marxist theory and practice are so fundamental to our lives that our college students should embrace Marxism and internalize it as part of their everyday orientation to life. I was inspired by his speech. With our government’s advocacy, our professor’s passionate dissemination, and our familiarity on Marxism, why not include it in our show? In effect, Professor Sun’s lecture was partially accountable for the birth of our Act Four. I picked three relatively well-known Marxist Statements and put them on the screen. Are those statements relevant in your life? How so? Or How not so?

(One female doctoral student, June, one male doctoral student, Jim, and one male master student, Tony, shared their opinions. Readers can find their stories in Appendix F.

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GAME TIME: WHO ARE YOU IN RELATIONSHIP TO OTHERS?

On the board, it shows the same slide in acts one and two repeatedly asked questions in the show.
Our mission:

1. Cultivate a sense of social responsibility and entrepreneur spirit
2. Encourage creativity and the ability to teach and conduct academic research independently
3. Dedicate to students' physical and mental health and growth.

Is the university responsible for our happy and meaningful life too?

Who else is responsible for our happiness?

Game 1: Trust Falls

ANGIE and the team show the audience how the game is played. She stands in the middle, surrounded by other performers, in a small circle.

ANGIE: I will initiate a collective playbuilding project. I need your support!

ANGIE closes her eyes, with two forearms crossed in front of her chest. She starts to fall.

Everybody gets ready to gently push ANGIE back to her neutral position and together they repeat the phrase, “I am here.”

ANGIE: Is the university responsible for my happy and meaningful life too? Who else is responsible for my happiness?

ANGIE keeps her eyes closed and falls again to another direction. The group says, “We are responsible” collectively.

ANGIE: Over the past two months, I have been tremendously moved by my extremely supportive team. I love you guys. Now, your turn. Anybody want to try this Trust Falls? Coming on stage is optional/voluntary. You can either say something out loud or think of something in your mind, before trying the game. All the supporting members surrounding the middle person will say “I am here” each time when they catch the falling middle person.

Two audience members (one female and one male) played Trust Falls.

Game 2: “I am a tree”

The game “I am a tree” is also about collaboration and creativity. As Sherlock Holmes famously proclaimed, “The game is afoot”!

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FINAL ONSITE DISCUSSION³⁶

Questions raised by the audience members about my research process & research methodology included:

Q1: What are the criteria you are going to adopt to claim the performance a success or failure?

Whether the audience was moved or touched by the performance? Whether any participants claimed to have been changed in any significant way?

Q2: You have artistically demonstrated some relationships between teachers and students in a soft way, and you intended to foster some significant change in the status quo or alter the environment in some fundamental way. If your project ends here, won't the reader feel that you don't really have a result?

Q3: After watching the performance, I want to know how you deal with the validity issue? Based upon the final performance? Or something else?

Q4: How will the audience's responses be integrated into your dissertation?

Q5: Do you consider your research project to be critical pedagogy research?

The curtain came down and the show ended. But our life journeys continue with our shared moments of unconditional love, of inspiration, of being collective selves. In many ways, we embodied the imperative: Walk the talk. We did not merely walk the talk, we sang the talk, cried the talk, and embraced the talk through hugs and bitter tears, which constituted a type of performative pedagogy that Chinese graduate students were unprepared for, yet found intriguing and worthwhile. As an artistic researcher, I am grateful for this experience with my Chinese participants, the opportunity to learn by doing, and the opportunity to improve my craft as a critical educator.

³⁶ The final group discussion was the last part of the show. I planned to have the last group discussion on my research methodology or research process. The discussions during the show focus on the content of the show.

A Brief Reflection

The standards to a successful performance or research project. To answer my audience member' questions listed above on the standards to a successful performance or research project, I want to make the following statement. This collective research project was an unusual approach within the Chinese higher education institutions, to examine education as both a practice of critique and as a criticism of practice. By nature, the research project was more of a collectively engagement, critical and theatrical praxis than a professional artistic production. No one on our team had professional theatrical training or a substantive background in performance art. A theatrical background was not in the recruitment criteria. My philosophy concerning the standards to success echoes John Dewey's idea of learning through doing. My playbuilding team and I stepped outside of our comfort zones and allowed our emotions and feelings to become "enfleshed" as we strived to permit our bodies to serve as volitional agents and make our voices heard. It was a success for my participants when they joined the theatrical movement to problematize and perform their lives. Our final performance was a success because they were confident enough to showcase their lives and brave enough to present an imperfect show from a professional theatrical perspective.

An improvised script versus a scripted show. During our collective creation process, I honored my group members by incorporating their creations into the final show. Scenes 1, 2, and 3 in Act 2 are almost the exact copy of the Group 2's collective creation (see Appendix E) during our 6th session. I realized after the research project was completed that when I transitioned the improvised script to the final script, the script lost its lively spirit in our final scripted performance. Metaphorically, we are protagonists in our lives which are improvisational shows. We are amateurs in the field of theatre; drama makes it unrealistic or unreasonable to judge our

success based on the professionalism of our final theatrical performance. As amateur performers, many of us felt more comfortable conducting an unscripted performance.

In our case, the structure of the scripted scene curtailed spontaneity. What if we did not use the scripted scenes and instead gave actors a new prompt in front of the audience? I had originally planned to add Boal's "forum theatre" into the final performance, which meant the audience members would have been expected to actively play a role and have their voice heard, shifting the power dynamic between actors and audience members. On retrospect, this would have been a better finale to the project because I would have avoided the artificiality of "performance" and instead enabled an embodied experience.

Though I did not try out forum theatre with my audience members, I was happy with the participation level during our final show. Audience members participated in the opening warm-up game, large and small group discussions during the performance, and two final two improvisational games. Some factors that affected the level of participation by the audience members included our performing time was limited and my facilitation skills.

David shared his assessments of the differences between the experiences of the playbuilding research group members and the audience members. During the playbuilding sessions, the playbuilding research group generated lots of free flow discussions about our own daily experiences. Whereas, the audience members' reflections were based upon the final performance. When reflecting on the possible gains of the audience, David noted, "Well, to what degree a performance can attract the audience into the theatrical story is hard to say. From this perspective, the primary participants should gain much more throughout the research process."

The experience for the audience and the research participants was different and should be different. I could not have created a theatrical experience for my audience that would replicate

what I did with my research participants over the course of eight sessions. What I could have done was to think through ways to engage the audience members better. David's comment on the distinction between an improvised scenario and a scripted show reminded me of the power of improvisation and forum theatre for audience engagement. I plan to incorporate forum theatre in future research projects.

Various stages we have been through together. It is time to revisit my second sub-question: What happens when graduate students are provided space and time to collectively problem-pose personal experiences and social norms, translate ideas into theatrical forms, and theatrically perform elements of their lives as protagonists? We had a group discussion stage (we conducted case studies on three chosen topics in the fourth session), a stage of an authentic encounter (we exchanged passions and friendships with some international critical pedagogues in the fifth session), a classroom presentational stage (we organized an improv game workshop after the fifth session), an improvised performative stage (we devised our scripts in the sixth session), and a stage of scripted performance with live discussion (we performed our final show in front of audience members). In chapters 4 and 5, I have elaborated on what we have achieved together. In the final chapter, I focused on what those experiences meant for our group and for a broader community.

CHAPTER 6: FINAL REFLECTIONS

The fundamental question framing this research project was: How can the process of playbuilding (i.e., the collective creation of a play) serve as a creative means for students to problem-pose their university experiences through the development of protagonistic agency (i.e., from the role of a spectator to that of an actor)? We do not own agency like a property; we perform our agency through enacting various relationships. In this research project, playbuilding, as a collective creation process, served as a vehicle to carry out the development of protagonistic agency. As a group, we refined the concept of protagonistic agency while performing it in a specific context. Protagonistic agency is compatible with a relational ontology (i.e., making meanings in various relationships), a dialectical epistemology (i.e., to be is to do; being in becoming), and a collective axiology (i.e., aiming for collective good).

In this final chapter, I readdress my research question through three points of reflection: (a) the refined concept of protagonistic agency in a Chinese context; (b) significance of the research project to my participants, to the world of academia, and to me; and (c) limitations and future research implications.

The Refined Concept of Protagonistic Agency

At the beginning of the dissertation, I elaborated my presumptions related to the concept of protagonistic agency based on relevant literature. The seven components to protagonistic agency are: (a) narrative; (b) intentionality; (c) critical consciousness; (d) a good cause (or for a collective good); (e) counternarrative; (f) praxis (i.e., connecting body and mind, theory and practice); and (g) student voice (see Table 23). During this research project, the key components to protagonistic agency functioned as a guidance to the research project. After completing the research project, I reflected on the research process and the ways I performed in the process, with

the intention of further refining the concept of protagonistic agency through adding and combining some components to the concept.

Table 23

The Presumed and the Refined Components to Protagonistic Agency

Presumed Components to Protagonistic Agency	Refined Components to Protagonistic Agency
Narrative	Naming and Counternarrative
Counternarrative	
Intentionality	A good cause (mutual unconditional love)
A good cause	
Critical consciousness	Collective Praxis (combination of self-enlightenment and mutual enlightenment)
Praxis	
Student voice	Individual and collective voice (a precondition)
	<i>Constant self-investigation</i>
	<i>Awareness of the context</i>
	<i>Positionality (a dialectical approach)</i>

The refined concept of protagonistic agency (see Table 23) is a revised version based on my new learnings from this research project, and a version that could better explain what happened during our playbuilding process. The added components include: (a) the power of naming, (b) the need to be aware of the context, (c) the importance of constant self-investigation, and (d) a dialectic approach to positionality. I combined *narrative* and *counternarrative* to “naming and counternarrative” to emphasize the power of naming in my research context. I placed *intentionality* under *a good cause* to emphasize the mutual unconditional love as “a good cause” for our actions. I combined *critical consciousness* and *praxis* to “collective praxis” to stress the importance of combining self-enlightenment and mutual enlightenment. I changed *student voice* to “individual and collective voice” as a precondition to protagonistic agency. Additionally, I made room for new knowledge in the refined version of the concept (see Table 23). I elaborated on each refined component of protagonistic agency throughout this chapter.

Figure 6. The refined components to protagonistic agency.

Embodying Protagonistic Agency: My Participants' Growth

In this following section, I combined my analyses of the refined components to protagonistic agency and my participants' testimonies regarding their growth and sometimes, regrets.

The Power of Naming: What Does “Agency” Mean in Chinese?

Generations of critical pedagogues have substantially talked about agency (Darder, 2016; Giroux, 1988a; McLaren, 2016). If I perceive life as performative, I am a protagonist and demonstrate aspects of protagonistic agency. In this research, I have been emphasizing the word agency from a theatrical framework—using theatre as a vehicle to carry out a praxis-based agency with a collective spirit. Deepening this aspect of agency can serve some emancipatory ends, ends that are democratic and designed to free ourselves from chains of domination and

oppression, and connect us through shared emotions and struggles for a better world. Why is it important to name this kind of agency? My research group had the following conversation on agency during our beginning sessions.

Angie: "How to say agency in Chinese in our context?"

Qi Li: "Institute?"

Da Li: "Let me check the dictionary . . . 'act on behalf of someone.'"

Angie: "No. At this moment, the only Chinese term I can think of that close to the meaning of agency I am talking about is 'an individual's conscious initiative'—a Marxist concept. To me, we need agency if we want to keep our decency as human beings."

We were not the only group of people in China who found it difficult to translate the word "agency" into Chinese, and in a Chinese context. I personally know a Chinese professor who posted this question: "What does agency mean in Chinese?" on his social media page. Another Chinese doctoral student who studies in the United States asked me the same question. How can we practice and embody a concept that has not yet been named? The naming process does not equal a process of literal translation. People in the East and West have always been learning from each other through reinventing outsider ideas (Freire, 1978, 1997a). Naming is to articulate a language of resistance. McLaren (1995) wrote:

Lacking a language of resistance, resistant students simply become signs of themselves, and can only encode the anxiety of the present and apprehension of the future.

Consequently, they remain in their resistance, dragged by images fleeing history, rather than forging symbols with the power to transform it. (p. 78)

In this research project, our group collectively named and refined the concept of protagonistic agency. In Qi Li's case, she named "an independent will."

Qi Li's story of naming and developing an independent will. Qi Li wanted to learn about herself through her participation in this research project. She started to discover herself in a group.

Qi Li: "I think I am getting to know myself in our group. I have been thinking of it a lot in the past few days."

Angie: "You have not been thinking of it before?"

Qi Li: "I have attended some of the group consultations on campus. Not because I have some psychological issues. I was merely interested in the activity. In those group consultations, we were encouraged to reflect on our family histories. But not much of who we are in a group. Recently, I have been asking my friends and roommates about me and I realized that they more or less see me similarly. It made me wonder—should I change? What else do I need to do if I want to be a better person? How to manage all kinds of relationships surrounding me?"

Angie: "Sounds like it could be one of the turning points in your life."

Qi Li: "Yes, yes, yes. But I am still not sure whether I really need to change or not. Or will it be good changes or bad ones? I think I don't have enough courage."

Angie: "How can you know if you never try?"

Qi Li: "Maybe not now. Maybe later in my life, when I am less busy, so that I have enough time and energy to try my best."

Change might happen when people are not paying attention to the "change" itself. When Qi Li played the game Trust Falls for the first time, she lost her independent will and was pushed around by the players surrounding her. When our performing group and some audience members played the game again during the final performance, an audience volunteer, Tony, was pushed around and was unable to make his own independent moves. Qi Li offered Tony a piece of advice and said, "You have to have your own consciousness." Tony responded, "Okay. I will try it again." This short conversation indicated Qi Li's growth in terms of her ability to name and demonstrate her growth.

Counternarrative: "Flipping the Script"

Protagonistic agents tell their stories in a specific context and learn about their social context through actively interacting with others in that shared environment. This story-sharing

moment evolves a dialectical relationship between an individual identity and a collective identity. McLaren (1995) stated that to take on the burden of being the storyteller of one's own life is not only to give life coherence, but to preserve the right to construct individual identities. Meanwhile, personal narratives "help share our social reality as much by what they exclude as what they include" (McLaren, 1995, p. 92). People choose to pay more attention to certain parts of one experience and abandon other parts to construct a coherent, logical, and consistent life story.

Based on the data generated from the first three playbuilding sessions, I categorized eight types of human interactions, many of which revealed the more passive roles that my participants played in their lives. The focus of the research process was on exploring and examining various types of human interactions and developing counternarratives when participants found it necessary.

My participants reflected on how their narratives and experiences had been shaping their daily actions. Xiao Xin shared several of her childhood traumas, which made her cautious about interpersonal relationships due to fear of rejection and repulsion. Xiao Si's mother's sickness made her re-evaluate the collective lifestyle (e.g., living in a shared dormitory room, participating in campus activities) and her choice to isolate herself. Tony was laughed at and bullied by some girls when he was a teenager. Thereafter, Tony decided to hide certain behaviors in order to be accepted by the group; he did, however, feel guilty about his own "strategic performance" in public (see Tony's story in Appendix F).

The obstacles confronting the protagonist may be referred to as antagonists, and the antagonists may include specific people (e.g., peers, teachers, parents), existential circumstances, administrative power structures, or layers of some governmental organizations. The specific or

abstract antagonists may be challenged by the protagonist through the creation of counternarratives that embolden participants to redefine their passive roles and assume more active and critical roles in the drama of their lives. Counternarratives in this context refer to the ways in which participants redefine their identities to enable them to assume a role that contests or challenges their antagonists or obstacles. We can also call it “flipping the script.”

As the lead researcher, I challenged participants to overcome the narratives that were negatively defining their lives and presented the idea of developing counternarratives that offer opportunities for critically examining, resisting, and overcoming those antagonists. The design of playbuilding scenarios enhanced the participants’ ability to take risks in their behaviors with the goal of becoming more critical and self-directed in facing the everyday challenges of graduate school, and in exploring different levels of interpersonal relationships through group exercises. Developing protagonistic agency in a playbuilding process means positioning participants at the center of the story and situating them as the primary agents propelling forward the story of their lives. The development of counternarratives among participants through playbuilding aimed to help participants see themselves as the active protagonist of their life story, who is responsible for making key decisions in overcoming obstacles and experiencing the consequences of those decisions. Da Lin was hurt badly by his first girlfriend. This experience turned him into a person who neither approaches nor rejects girls. After sharing many of his traumas in life, Da Lin received a lot of positive feedback and support from group members. Toward the end of the collective project, Da Lin recast his identity and courageously approached a girl he liked. In Da Lin’s case, by reorganizing his experiences, reviewing, and reevaluating the significance of those experiences, he found he could transform his narratives, which means he could transform himself.

As a playbuilding investigation strategy, the prompt (i.e., a series of questions; Weigler, 2001) carries the potential to promote protagonistic agency by challenging participants to problem-pose, critically think through issues they are facing, and struggle in solidarity with their peers. When the group engaged in case studies, the prompt was successfully adopted by the group as a vehicle to develop counternarratives. For instance, the group collectively redefined the concept of failure in the contexts of some group members' stories.

Awareness of the Context: A Culture That Celebrates Social Harmony

In 2013, the Chinese government created and announced some 3-level (i.e., 12-phrase) core socialist values as guidelines for national development and citizens' practices (The General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2013). On the national level, the goals of national development are prosperity, democracy, civility, and harmony. On the societal level, the core values of social practices are freedom, equality, justice, and rule of law. On the individual citizen level, the guidelines for individual practices are patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship. The issue of the official and civic interpretations and implementations of the core socialist values is, in itself, a worthy platform from which to conduct future research. In this section of my dissertation, I focused on the values of prosperity and harmony as goals of China's national development in order to demonstrate several cultural obstacles confronting the development of protagonistic agency.

Incompatibility between harmony and competition. In Chapter 2 of this dissertation, I mentioned some modern Chinese national mentalities or characteristics of mind. One of those mentalities was: Chinese people have to get strong culturally, economically, and militarily; otherwise, we could be beaten up and enslaved by those who are stronger. In other words, China needs to compete with other capitalist countries on the world stage. For the past few decades,

Chinese economy has been prospering very quickly with the benefit of relative social stability and a capitalist market economy (Wen, 2016). However, in the name of social stability the government can, and does, use this as a pretext for mass surveillance, censorship of the media and political repression. This, of course, is also true of other countries, including those that consider themselves democratic.

When it comes to the educational system, I connect the mentality of competition to the accumulation of information and knowledge. Students who absorb the most facts are those who will win the competition. This reflects Freire's "banking model" of learning in schools, which often gives little or no space to active learning, the fostering of imagination, or critical thinking. Based on reflections from my own schooling experiences and those of my peers', the Chinese educational system could severely restrict the learning possibilities of Chinese students by amplifying the idea of competition during their formative school years. In a conversation with Qi Li and one of my critical friends, Deng, we discussed an emergent double bind situation.

Qi Li: "When I was in high school, my teachers always questioned us: You all are on the same campus, in the same classroom, sharing the same teachers, how come your academic performances vary so much?"

Angie: "I would respond: 'If we can agree on the idea that each student is unique, why do we adopt the same set of rubrics to measure everyone?'"

Qi Li: "Because scientifically, the educational system makes sure that all the variables that could possibly affect students' performances are controlled, so that we can fairly measure the results."

Angie: "If the goal of schooling is to stratify the students, it is contradictory to ask all students to perform equally well. It is a catch-22 situation."

Deng: "Many Chinese students take the same set of rubrics for granted. Angie problematized this measurement. Angie is actually questioning the precondition and the rationality of our taken-for-granted assumption. For me, this is one of the highlights of critical pedagogy—speak on the side of the powerless and question the preconditions of the mainstream mentality."

Chinese students participate in the fiercest competitions throughout their school years involving a brutal administration of standardized testing. Competition over grades is the signature conflict they have to face. Many of them blame themselves for their failure if they do not achieve high grades. Some students grow frustrated and ask, “What’s the purpose of schooling?” They begin to question the effect that competition has on their emotional health and well-being as they become relentlessly alienated from the products of their own academic labor. Critical pedagogy addresses many of the obstacles to self-development that are inherent in a system predicated on capitalist competition in which knowledge is commodified in ways that advantage the health of economy over the emotional health of the learner. Playbuilding stresses the importance of cooperation over competition. By working together, we are closer to wholeness. Greene (1995) stated, “if teaching can be thought of as an address to others’ consciousness, it may be a summons on the part of one incomplete person to other incomplete persons to reach for wholeness” (p. 26).

In this research project, I promoted a collective way of being—the idea of togetherness—and the goal of social harmony through the notion of incompleteness, not through a mentality of pure competition.

The complementary dynamic between harmony and conflict. On the one hand, I recognize the value of being a considerate and cooperative social being in a community or as a citizen of a country. From my observations as a student in Northeast China, Chinese students in general are very polite and cooperative in and outside the classroom. Following the rules in educational settings is not of recent vintage. There is a long history in China: Societal rules are not simply taken for granted but inculcated in students as being absolutely necessary for a harmonious and smoothly functioning society. Challenging these rules under any circumstance

signals to the teacher and to other students that you selfishly value your individual identity over the collective well-being and harmony of the group. Here, the struggle to achieve harmony is often recast in patriotic and nationalistic terms. Consequently, challenging the taken-for-granted system is perceived as fracturing the imagined collective harmony that exists. Rupturing such harmony in the classroom is, writ large, tantamount to a form of pedagogical outlawry, betraying the nation by making it less equipped to overcome competitive challenges from other countries. Consequently, students are less likely to externalize their frustrations and draw attention to the contradictions that they perceive in the pedagogical relationships in which they are participating.

How do core socialist values and the Chinese tradition of honoring harmony affect Chinese citizens' daily practices? In the following two occasions, some of my participants expressed that they disdain conflicts.

(Occasion 1)

Angie: "Go back to our situation here. Since we have been feeling sick of these kinds of students' presentations, what can we do to change the situation? What about collectively writing an email to a professor?"

Guo Li: "But if we collect students' signatures, won't the professor wonder—What do you want? Rebellion?"

Da Lin: "You don't see that often happen very often for sure."

(Occasion 2)

David: "Yesterday, a friend in my social network posted a selfie and noted: Among girls, we don't need to fight—I won by being the prettiest!"

Angie: "This girl on your social network downplayed our girls' ability to resolve conflicts!"

David & Guo Li: "Most likely, this girl lost a fight to another girl."

Guo Li: "When it was time to compete for direct admission opportunity, it was merely chaotic in our class. Some of them started to backstab each other. I was agitated. My dad responded, 'You girls are fussy! If it were a group of boys, it would have only taken them a face-to-face argument or a fight to resolve the problem.'"

As social beings, we need to experience challenges and conflicts rather than hide them under the pretext of serving the interests of the collective. Rather than cultivating a herd instinct, we need to increase the ability of students to cope with difficult situations in our lives, to connect and cooperate with others effectively, and to grow intellectually and morally. Often in the name of protection, parents, schools, and government officials regulate the lives of young people without giving them sufficient space or opportunities to deal with conflicts and contradictions, even in the most general circumstances; there is no choice but to become naïve and fragile (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018).

People try to reach individual and social harmony through dealing with conflicts. I look at the relationship between harmony and conflict from the vantage point of ancient Chinese philosophy, in particular the wisdom tradition. In *The Book of Changes*, the author included the following saying: Everything living in eternity exists through change (生生之谓易). To maintain social harmony, it is necessary to look at the dynamic dialectical relationship between conflict and harmony.

Practitioners within the Chinese Taoist tradition of the *Tao Te Ching* employ the concept of “One-Two-Three” to explain the world. What follows is my understanding of this ancient Chinese philosophy. First, being cannot exist without the concept of nothingness and *vice versa*. Therefore, being and nothingness have to coexist as the One. To use a term from quantum physics, this One is similar to the superposition principle. Being and nothingness, as two aspects of the One, is called the Two (i.e., all binary concepts created to understand the world—big versus small, high versus low, harmony versus conflicts, etc.). What is the essence of being? What makes being distinguishable from nothingness? It is the change or exchange of energy in being. Without such changes, being equals nothingness. Three is used to indicate various and

continuous (ex)changes. What is the drive of the (ex)changes? Water will flow down when there is a height difference. Air will flow when there is a temperature difference. If one puts a dam in the middle of the river, to some extent they can stop the water from flowing. In other words, there have to be two different—but not exclusively distinct—energies that coexist. Two separate and clear-cut energies have no way to exchange. In this sense, Energy A (i.e., Yin energy) always contains some elements of Energy B (i.e., Yang energy), and *vice versa*. Energy A and Energy B are different, but also share sameness to exchange and coexist, which leads back to the concept of One.

If our ways of being is One, harmony and conflict are the complementary Two. Without facing conflicts, one does not see meaningful harmony; without a goal of harmony, one does not see a point of dealing with conflicts. A person's instinct might be to avoid conflicts or violence, but the reality is that people live in a violent world full of contradictions and conflicts. To bravely deal with conflicts should be an example of good and critical citizenry, rather than of being disparaged as unpatriotic behavior. It is to understand that the choice at hand is not to be patriotic or unpatriotic (an “either/or” position) but to be critical and simultaneously patriotic (a “both/and” position). Challenging the violence of everyday life is an example of good citizenship since it constitutes our fundamental right or ontological vocation to be fully human. As Freire (2003) stated:

Never in history has violence been initiated by the oppressed . . . There would be no oppressed had there been no prior situation of violence to establish their subjugation . . .

Whereas the violence of the oppressors prevents the oppressed from being fully human, the response of the latter to this violence is grounded in the desire to pursue the right to be human. (p. 55)

From the perspective of critical pedagogy, the question that needs to be most urgently asked is: Whose benefit does this fighting serve? What levels of harmony are being addressed? Rivage-Seul (2008) explained the concept of three levels of violence from the perspective of liberation theology that is apposite for our discussion. Religious figures Dom Helder Cámara and Óscar Romero spoke of a “bloody trinity” consisting of three levels of violence: (a) structural violence, first-level violence, or violence of the “father” refers to “social, economic, political, and military systems and arrangements, codified in law and custom that are responsible for tens of thousands of innocent deaths throughout the world each day” (Rivage-Seul, 2008, p. 169); (b) revolutionary violence, second-level violence, or violence of the “son” is the response to first-level or structural violence; and (c) reactionary violence, third-level violence, or violence of the “evil spirit” is “the state’s reply to acts of rebellion against structural violence” (Rivage-Seul, 2008, p. 170). For instance, the rules of economic competition within capitalist systems could be categorized as structural violence—it is not a fair game, but people who do not have the privilege to set the rules or to escape the rules are forced to follow them. While structural violence prevails in today’s imperial regimes, revolutionary violence is the only violence officially condemned by almost all the states, with military force as the symbol of reactionary violence (Rivage-Seul, 2008). Among the three levels of violence, revolutionary violence is the only violence that can at least be theoretically justified (Rivage-Seul, 2008).

Being protagonistic agents means making social harmony the shared goal, but not at the expense of camouflaging conflicts under the banner of good citizenship. It means learning to deal with conflict dialectically and not blaming yourself or others for the “trouble” that it may have caused.

The Power of Connection: Who Else Is Responsible for My Happiness?

During our final performance, a female graduate student stated: “Who really cares about how students feel?” Another female audience member similarly expressed: “Schools, in general, are not ideal places for individuals to grow and shine . . . We hide our dreams, our emotions, and our power if we perceive the environment as unsupportive or repressive.” It is disconcerting and even heartbreaking to listen to those statements. What are the promises and expectations of a university for its students? What kinds of roles do students play on campus? During some of the playbuilding sessions, the group talked about issues such as the meaning of getting a master’s degree, how to make the experience more meaningful by connecting the course material to existential aspects of their lives, and the value of classroom learning. Many participants confessed that if they had to choose, they would give up a class learning opportunity in order to focus on publishing academic papers or working on their theses or dissertations. Their responses made me wonder about the mission statement of their graduate program. When our group members read the mission statement, which was called “Mission and Graduation Qualification of Master Programs in Education,” we realized that we neither knew anything about it nor cared about it. There was a gap between students’ dreams in graduate school and the school’s mission and values for the students. There are only regulations and a principle of market exchange in the mission statement, but barely any human development or relational growth between the university and the students.

Happiness is an abstract term, but a very important concept. For me, happiness needs to be imagined, claimed, and concretized through building connections. Imagination is about possibility and awakening, not necessarily pointing to a resolution (Greene, 1995). Greene (1995) stated, “the role of imagination is not to resolve, not to point the way, not to improve. It is

to awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected” (p. 27). Many of the improv games I planned for the research group aimed at the intensified feeling of caring for others and bodily connections, which included the unseen connections between mind and body. After participating in the game “I Am” poem, Ah Yang expressed his powerful sense of connection with the group and each member in the group: “When I repeated ‘I am a person who practices Kung Fu,’ I was powerfully touched by my statement. When do we have the opportunity to sincerely speak out loud about our wishes and our hopes? We sit here; we listen to each other’s stories. I feel so real. Nowadays, with cell phones and technology, we have less and less face-to-face communications.”

Maxine Greene (1978) recounted that in the 19th and early 20th centuries many imaginative works of literature were written when the idea of progress was problematic and questionable, or taken-for-granted values of ordinary life were being re-evaluated. After that period of time, a great deal of emphasis was increasingly placed on the issue of social stability and the importance of social progress, rather than the promotion of individual happiness (Greene, 1978). In this regard, Chinese students need to reclaim an affirmative culture—a culture that reflects concern for the individual’s claim to happiness (Marcuse, 1968).

Playbuilding as a powerful art form, a microcosm of the society at large, is intended to focus on a controversial topic such as “schools are not ideal places for individuals to shine.” During the final performance, I posted the following question on the screen for people to think about: Is the university responsible for students’ happy and meaningful schooling experiences? Who else, besides ourselves, is responsible for students’ happiness? I addressed these questions through playing the game Trust Falls with some audience members. The spirit of the game in this context was group support and solidarity. When I demonstrated the game with my participants

for the audience members, I inserted a scripted line into the game. I stood in the middle with my eyes closed. Before I fell, I asked, “Who else, besides myself, is responsible for my happiness?” The group caught my falling body and responded in unison “We are responsible.” In my modest attempt to initiate an act of collective solidarity, bringing together mind and body, head and heart, our bodies moved in unison as one living, breathing symbol of shared responsibility. This exercise pointed to collective responsibility for students’ well-being. Through this exercise, I visualized the power of connection and a way of being called “mutual caring”—I care about your happiness, which is part of my own happiness. We are connected through what I called mutual care and mutual love. The spirit of collective being is the spirit of protagonistic agency.

Mutual Unconditional Love as a Good Cause

When it comes to the impact of this research project, it is meaningful for me to make incremental progress even if it might on the surface seem insignificant. The process is always more important than the result because my participants found that the improvisational activities grounded in the imperatives of critical pedagogy provided the space and the motivation for them to voice and to perform the frustrations and contradictions they experienced as graduate students. I documented my participants’ growth throughout this chapter. In this section, I added a few more accounts of my participants’ reflections to illustrate their transformations and the love that transpired among our group members.

Xiao Si’s story on reconnecting herself with a collective group. Xiao Si experienced great love and trust when playing the game Trust Falls: “I have experienced a great sense of safeness with all of you. When we play the game Trust Falls, as a supporter, I was fully prepared, physically, and psychologically, to catch the person in the middle. When I was standing in the middle, I noticed that I trusted the group to catch me, no matter what directions I fall over. I had

not experienced this level of trust and love elsewhere for a very long time. Maybe it was because I have isolated myself for too long. When love finally hits me, it could never be a light one.”

At the beginning of the research process, each participant shared their reasons for joining this playbuilding group. Xiao Si expressed, “I chose to join the group because one day, all of a sudden, I started to dislike the ‘collective lifestyle,’ and started to prefer living alone. This collective playbuilding opportunity is a new challenge to me; I wish to get out of that ‘locked room.’” At our last gathering, I asked her how she felt about the whole process. She experienced an emotional breakdown and cried. She expressed that she trusted and loved each group member, and she felt so bad that it was the time to end it: “The whole day today, I have been trying to adjust my emotions. I apologize for my emotional breakout. I was thinking of the reason I come to our group in the first place and the fact that this is our last getting-together event. I was not like what I appear right now. I used to love being part of a group. I was much more outgoing. All of those memories and emotions burst out of my chest today.”

Then she shared with us what happened back at home for the first time. Xiao Si’s mother suddenly got ill last summer. She was forced to assume the responsibility of an adult daughter, which was emotionally taxing for her. Many times, she felt she could not adequately handle the situation. She chose to close up her world because of this sudden change at home: “Maybe others don’t mind listening to my family things. But maybe it is just my personality. I don’t have much of a sense of security. I don’t know how to talk about my mother’s illness with others. So, I chose to keep it to myself without telling anyone. And, I said to myself that I have to be strong . . . Ultimately, we decide what the influential factors in our lives are! I learned it from you, sister. It touched my heart. No matter good things or so-called ‘bad things’ in life, we can always choose our attitude or mindset when we face the harshness of reality. We carry with us different

experiences, goals, and anticipations. The manner we assume toward life events will affect our gains or losses.”

David’s transformational views on the connection between work and life or between theory and practice. David was both honest and private in our group. He honored efficiency and ownership of ideas. When the group talked about a classroom learning opportunity, he expressed, “I could use the time to publish more papers.” He added, “When sharing one’s ideas in a classroom setting, others could steal your ideas and write an article quickly based upon your ideas.” For David and many doctoral students in China, academic publications are more practical and/or important than the exchange of ideas; competition, instead of cooperation, dominates the classroom environment.

After the project, David shared more with me about his personal life. He said he dislikes working in general—working is boring in nature and is something he has to endure. When he is not working, he wants more fun and carefree happiness. However, if he has to do something, he wants to be the best. When pursuing his bachelor’s degree in economics, he published a significant amount of journal articles, which led to direct admission to a master’s program in education. Even though he disliked the field of education and regarded it as an outdated field, the direct admission opportunity only offered him a place in the field of education. He took the opportunity and started his journey in a master’s program in education. When he was there, he realized he could not use the “tricks” he mastered when studying economics to publish articles in education. He was frustrated for a while and chose to read the works of classic German philosophers and started to learn German because he realized he could not compete with students who could read and write in English better than he. Of course, David is not the only one who looks at work and play as a strict dichotomy.

During the post-performance dinner, David reflected on his expected and unexpected changes. He believes a new environment presents itself as a stimulus for potential new development. Looking back, he noted that he often experienced significant growth during transitional periods of his life. The group represented a new culture with a different atmosphere. Joining the group required David to adjust to a new environment and challenge himself. The unique atmosphere of the group convinced him to stay. David confessed that in the past, he had rarely committed himself to something for an extended time. The fact that he stayed through the whole two-month project held significant meaning for me. I asked him the extent to which he stayed in the group out of politeness. He responded, “politeness can never be a major issue in my world.” He said he stayed because of the group’s unique atmosphere, which made him think.

The group helped to shift one of David’s academic beliefs. David believed a philosopher’s life history and theoretical/philosophical trajectory are either two separate lines or lines that sometimes contradict each other. He would look for evidence to prove his hypotheses such as searching through Rousseau’s biographical information and the ideas he presented in *Emile*. Recently, he shifted to look at how theory and practice, or how one’s personal life and academic life, mutually reinforced each other. They were, in fact, co-constitutive of each other. He stated, “The change of view acts as a shock to my previous research; and has a potential impact on my future research.” What he said was transformational. He used to look for evidence to validate his lifestyle—he did not have to love or believe what he was writing about because a job is a job. Joining the group made him think of possibilities for connecting work with life.

Da Lin and Jia Lin’s continued theatrical practices in the classroom. A year after the collective project, Da Lin completed his first year as a doctoral student at another university in Southern China. He chose to conduct his dissertation on classroom drama. During the research

project, Jia Lin was deciding between staying in Northeast China or going to Southern China. She decided to go to Shanghai and work in a private kindergarten where she could do drama and games with children.

Beautiful memories, lasting friendships, and an inspiring experience. A year later, I initiated an informal meeting with some of my participants. When I asked them what they thought about the project and what moments stood out most in their memory, they provided the following answers:

Guo Li: "I told my friends about us in this way: Each time, when we get together, I was able to get my negative thoughts out. Therefore, I often miss our gatherings. I miss us playing, chatting, and eating together. In the past year, there were so many weekends, I felt so bored—I would not feel like reading, nor watching shows, nor playing outside. I thought of our group a lot in those moments. I felt that we were really close as a group."

Xiao Si: "I saw your flowers from your social media postings. I would imagine you as flowers—smell good. And you were talking about how different each one of your flowers was. Metaphorically, you are like that special flower—beautiful and special."

Da Li: "I would remember those special feelings of being with our group—so comfortable and relaxing. When this summer gets really hot, I remember us sitting together in one room last summer. We sat in your living room, chatting and eating snacks. I really miss that relaxing, liberating, and humanizing atmosphere. Also, Xiao Xin and I are neighbors in our dorm building. Each time when I saw her, I would be reminded of our group. I would feel the closeness. Xiao Xin is one year ahead of me, normally, I should call her Shi-Jie. But because of our group, when I see Xiao Xin, Xiao Si, and Jia Lin, I simply call them by their nicknames. We don't feel the hierarchy anymore because of our group."

Angie: "Otherwise, two persons from different emphases might never talk to each other."

Xiao Si: "Right! One of my roommates was so surprised that I know Xiao Xin. I wouldn't have known her without our project."

David: "When I went to observe some of the local elementary schools, they had drama performances in Chinese class or science class. I would compare two kinds of performances. We had emotions that lead the circumstances. They utilized certain circumstances to promote emotions. I was thinking the pros and cons of two kinds of performances and how can we combine them maybe."

Angie and Guo Li: "Very academic perspective!"

David: "But I have not figured that out yet."

My participants and I shared a portion of our life journeys with each other. I facilitated and participated in this shared journey because I love them, and I care about them. When people do things out of unconditional love, they care about everything related to their partners. I wanted to respect their voices, their narratives, their readiness for transformation, their particular roles in a group, and I was privileged to be part of my participants' lives. Unconditional love leads to collective ways of being, which is the spirit of protagonistic agency.

Acting as a Protagonistic Agent: My Growth and Limitations

“If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

— Aboriginal activists' group, Queensland, 1970s

I did not approach my participants to resolve their problems. Much like the opening quotation in this chapter. I was there primarily because my liberation is bound up with that of my participants. I intended to create the conditions for protagonistic agency with them and to inspire more people to practice individual, collective, and public agency. With their support, I was able to be a person who cares about others who care about me and who finds meanings when connecting with others. Some of my participants asked me about my purpose for pursuing a PhD. I answered, “I want to co-create spaces of opportunity with graduate students so that we can engage our academic life in a more critical fashion.” Engaging creatively and critically with our professors, our fellow students, and our friends and acquaintances can help to challenge the current emphasis in Chinese education on memorization and learning by rote—in short, Freire's banking model of education. Students are not a tabula rasa which need to be filled to the brim with information and facts selected carefully for them in a system that determines what knowledge is of most worth. And this often means challenging an educational system that is

disconnected from the lived experiences of its students. Students should also play a role in determining what knowledge is of most worth. Engaging critically with others means, in Freire's terms, reading both the world and the world. This research project was a process of self-and social empowerment. It appeared to me that self-liberation can only be achieved collectively. It cannot be accomplished in isolation from others. Liberation can only be true liberation if it touches the social realm of everyday life as well as the personal realm. It must make a contribution to building a better society in terms of how it treats its citizens, in this case, its university students. My participants were the closest witnesses to this process and its most reliable supporters. I sincerely hope that this collective journey will inspire them to embark in new directions on their own journeys of self-and-social liberation with the help of people surrounding them. I imagined and planned possibilities of extending this research project for many years. I felt fortunate and grateful to have my wonderful group who helped me turn my imagination into reality. It was, in the end, a parallel process: While my participants were going through some transformational moments, I was doing the same. Some of my research journals reflect my emotional struggles during the research process.

It is like daydreaming. I have been repeating one sentence again and again sometimes out loud, sometimes in my mind: It is not the end, but the beginning of the rest of my life. It might be some unconscious self-protective mechanism. I was not content with my recent performances, either the workshop in the classroom or our last playbuilding session. I felt like I was not fully prepared. I have been preoccupied with an international conference that happened on campus in the previous week. I had been playing the role of a voluntary quasi-conference organizer. Still haven't learned the skill of multitasking well . . .

During the research project, I frequently experienced feelings of inadequacy and fear. I challenged myself to be brave and embody the spirit of protagonistic agency. Goffman (1986) offered an illuminating insight when he asserted that what makes people nervous is not necessarily the “facts” they are trying to hide from others, but the very act of hiding. I once heard a comforting and courageous story about self-acceptance. The story goes: A patient went to see his doctor. The patient said, “Doctor, I have to tell you that I don’t have a bed-wetting problem anymore.” “Wow,” the doctor responded with curiosity, “What did you do?” The patient answered with delight, “Another doctor of mine told me that it is okay to experience bed-wetting.”

Self-acceptance does not conflict with self-investigation. There is an ancient Chinese saying from the book, *Mencius*, “Turn inward and examine yourself when you encounter difficulties in life (行有不得, 反求诸己).” I learned to be brave enough to embrace an incomplete self and to conduct self-investigation.

While reflecting on the research process and my roles in the process, I have also learned the importance of constant self-investigation while engaging in activities as a protagonistic agent. Some of the lessons I have learned include a dialectical approach to assuming to the concept of leader. Being a protagonistic agent does not mean one has to be the leader of the group. Not being the leader in the group does not mean you cannot lead. Not leading the group activities does not mean you are not contributing to the well-being of the group. A dialectical approach to positionality means paying attention to the dynamic of the group and always being ready to adjust the roles in the group according to the group’s needs.

When I was finishing this dissertation in the United States, COVID-19 was striking the world viciously. Some nations, ethnic groups, and individuals were blamed or scapegoated for

the origin or handling of the pandemic. In this specific space and time, writing a dissertation in English about the development of protagonistic agency in China stipulates approaching the concept of researcher critically.

Learning to Be a Researcher: Self-Investigation of Ethical Limitations

In this research, I was the research project initiator, the facilitator, a group participant, the side coach of the improv games, a playwright, and a performer. My involvement or interaction with the research team was essential. Our group members jointly constructed meanings and produced dialogues that were bidirectional and mutually stimulating. In principle I led; but I did not try to dominate the research process. This participatory arts-based research was a journey of finding and letting go of myself. Without finding myself, I could not act upon the world; without letting go of myself, I could force my will on others. I believe the best traveler is a lost traveler—being lost with an open heart and ears to listen and connect, with a firm intention to discover self and others, and the readiness to be altered and to (re)construct at any time. When encountering my participants, my persistent and irresistible mission of being a big loving sister sneaked out periodically. This role of a big loving sister was not always congruent with my role as the leading researcher. I reflected on my unprofessional responses to Xiao Xin's story detailed in Chapter 4. I asked myself: When is guidance not a good thing? How did my well-intended protectionism influence and distract me from my research goal, which was developing protagonistic agency? Well-intended protectionism could mean to give guidance when not asked, and to assume that I know better than another. I learned that while well-meaning, the facilitator must be fully aware of unintentional dominance and show skills in deference—by not speaking first or last.

Throughout the research process, Xiao Xin was genuinely open and honest with the group. She shared several of her most private childhood stories with strong emotions and sentiments—her childhood trauma, her sense of inferiority, her incongruency between her warm heart and serious face. A few of the scenes in our final script were based on her narratives. Xiao Xin shared a powerful story (Story 8³⁷) during our case study session. I had a heartfelt, but also problematic conversation with her. Since Xiao Xin’s story is really powerful, and my responses are the targets of my self-investigation, I incorporated our conversation in full length.

Xiao Xin: “Don’t laugh at me. This story carries significant weight in my life. When I was in Grade 9, I did not perform well in one of my exams. My parents had always been very strict when it came to my academic performance. I was supposed to bring back an award toward the end of each semester because it had a lot to do with my father’s reputation in his social circle. Since I did not perform well that time, I was not awarded in that semester. One day, I walked back home from school with two of my classmates, who were also my friends. I will call them Girl A, and Girl B. I told them that I was so afraid to go back home without an award because my father would be really angry. At the time, both Girl A and Girl B had their awards with them. Girl A suggested to change the name on Girl B’s award into my name. Girl B agreed; Girl B is a distant relative of mine. We managed to change the name on the award. I thought I was saved. But we happened to have a comprehensive assessment in that semester—we all had to list all the awards we had received, among other honors. Girl B told her parents the whole thing we had done. Girl B’s parents were really serious about it because they did not want their child to be affected by this incident, which might interfere with their daughter’s chance to go to a good high school. Therefore, Girl B’s parents told the school what had happened. Then, they went to complain to my parents [Xiao Xin starts to cry]. I was absolutely traumatized by the incident. The whole class knew what happened. I was feeling perturbed and afraid for very long time.”

Angie: “You cannot move on from the incident. What about your parents?”

Xiao Xin: “When the whole thing happened, my parents did not mention it to me at all. But once, when my father was drunk, he told me that he felt so ashamed because of my behavior.”

Angie: “Your father’s drunken feedback hurt you further?”

Xiao Xin: “Correct. What made me feel more shameful was that all the teachers knew the incident.”

³⁷ Participants shared 10 stories in all three case studies during our 4th session. I assigned each story a number for my follow-up analyses. Xiao Xin’s story was story #8.

Angie: "From my point of view, you are a victim. The parents and the teachers at the time did not take care of the incident properly. You changed the name on the award because you did not want to disappoint your father. And you suffered from your parents' excessive expectations toward you. You were only a child. Your instinct was to avoid pain. What other choices did you have? Girl B's parents could have resolved the incident privately, since you and Girl B were just two kids."

Xiao Xin: "At the time, they saw me as..."

Angie: "The initiator of the whole misconduct?"

Xiao Xin: "Yes."

Angie: "In the end, parents, teachers, and students all knew the story. You had no place to hide."

Xiao Xin: "Yes. For very long time, I was so afraid of people talking behind my back."

Angie: "The whole thing could be so insignificant. However, the significance was exaggerated. I once shared with a few of you about my own public shaming experiences for being poor. For many years, I felt ashamed and inferior in school since I was publicly shamed in front of the whole school of thousands of students and hundreds of teachers. Schools and parents sometimes do not take children's sensitivity into account. When we are young, our world could be so small, even a 'small' hurtful incident could mean the whole world to us. We should never treat children as senseless beings. Children are very sensitive."

Xiao Xin: "Since then, whenever I came across situations involving certificates or awards, I would always be reminded of that shameful incident when I was in Grade 9."

Angie: "As of now, as a victim, how do you see the whole thing back then?"

Xiao Xin: "I should not have accepted the award from Girl B. I should have said 'NO' with a firm position."

Angie: "You still think it was your fault."

Xiao Xin: "I still think I was responsible for the most part."

Angie: "But you falsified the award for your father. The purpose was to avoid his anger or disappointment, not for your own vanity. The purposes of your behavior are different. It is like one of Kohlberg's stories of moral dilemmas: the Heinz dilemma. Heinz breaks into a drug store to steal an expensive drug for his dying wife. The drug is overpriced. Heinz does not have enough money to buy the drug, while his wife is dying. Heinz does not have a choice. You were only a child. You did not have many choices either. You thought things could just pass. However, the comprehensive assessment in school happened as a surprise to you. Then, the whole incident was spinning out of control. We have to re-examine the approach of awarding a few students in schools. What would the kids with no award think? 'Am I stupid?' 'Am I not good enough?' Even parents were bought into this rewards-and-punishments system. If you still think you were the one who should take the most blame, I think you still have not problematized our school's rewarding system. I think your father needs to re-examine his expectations toward you

and his behaviors as well. I was actually shocked a bit when you answered that you still think you should be the one to blame.”

Xiao Xin: “But, even if I have seen this fault of the system, I was still hurt by how my teachers and my classmates reacted. My psyche is still affected by that shadow.”

Angie: “You think they still remember what happened back then? Or you think they will never change their attitude toward the incident?”

Xiao Xin: “Not really. But I still feel the pain when I think of the whole thing.”

Angie: “It is never easy to overcome traumas.”

Xiao Xin: “I never ever want to experience that feeling of uneasiness anymore.”

Angie: “I could not get over my own trauma from public shaming for many years. We might never be able to erase those traumatic experiences. But we can surely learn something from those firsthand experiences. For instance, we learned not to judge an incident, or a person based on an overly simplistic standard of right or wrong. We recognize the complicity of the issue, without morally blackmailing others. We especially should not morally kidnap a child. Back to our traumas, we are capable of dealing with our traumas in our own ways. Be patient with your traumas. Be nice to yourself.”

Jia Lin: “I am sure that you will not treat your kid the way you had been treated. It was only one of the failures in the process of growing up. The more important thing is that you have a positive attitude and goal now.”

In retrospect, my responses to Xiao Xin’s story was not professional, and might even be considered judgmental and inappropriate. In the real world, things are not simply about good versus bad or victim versus perpetrator. I love and care for each of my participants. Whenever I hear these sad stories, I immediately, sometimes unconsciously, switch my role as researcher to big sister. I call this a protective mode. Guo Li said I am her angel because she felt my love as a big sister. Jia Lin once commented that I was very protective of my participants. I invited some of my secondary participants (i.e., the audience members) to have one-on-one conversations with me because I spotted their struggles and pains in life and I wanted to show my care. When it came to Xiao Xin’s story, I wanted to drag Xiao Xin out of that pain and humiliation. I was publicly humiliated when I was young. After my public shaming event, I blamed myself for many years for being depressed until I realized I was victimized by my school and my schooling system. I healed myself and fight now for a more humanitarian system. A research project has

always been a means to realize my goal of being a light in the world. As a beam of “scholarly light,” I have much to learn and relearn.

Looking back, I see that my way of analyzing this incident was not professionally appropriate; I am not a therapist. Because of my power as their *Shi-Jie*, my opinions could have been taken as “truth.” I realize now that when I lean over to reach another soul, I need to reset my mentality and not allow my “take for granted” mentality to dictate the interpretations of other’s stories; individuals live in their own particular context. Enforced or biased opinions, out of love, can still be violent. I could have been more patient and offered space and time for Xiao Xin and other participants to reflect on the ways that we frame childhood memories and how those frameworks affect our self-perceptions and behaviors.

During the post-performance reflection session, Xiao Xin expressed: “Today, I feel like I have so much to share. First and foremost, I learned to express myself much better. I always wish to do more for a group. Then, over time, I could be popular in the group.” I asked, “Did you expose your shortcomings in our group?” She laughed and said, “I haven’t noticed that!” I felt so happy and proud of her because, in the questionnaire, Xiao Xin stated her concern was to expose her shortcomings in the group.

A year later, Xiao Xin shared with me many changes in her view of her life and her way of interacting with others. Even though Xiao Xin failed her doctoral program entrance exam, she could talk about her “failure” light-heartedly. Xiao Xin said: “Last year, I complained about my mentor. I thought she was always impatient with me. In the past year, however, I took the initiative to approach her like a friend. I realized that I could understand her better. She is an excellent teacher and a mother.” Hearing her take initiative was delightful for me because a year

ago, she even did not dare to express her enthusiasm to others. In the end, she said, “I will be a high school teacher soon, and I plan to use drama in my classroom.”

Two years after the research project, I asked Xiao Xin how she felt when I confronted her narrative of her ninth grader’s wrongdoing. She said, “It is very interesting that when you mentioned that major incident in my life, emotionally, I don’t react to it anymore. Your confrontation really helped me. I have stopped blaming myself. Thank you, sister.”

Freedom operates differently for each person. To be a true listener and ally in another person’s life, I need to temporarily suspend my default operational rules/philosophies, which were generated in my life context, and reset my mindset to truly perceive and feel others’ constraints and frames in their lives. A self-examination or self-interrogation is necessary to reset default mindsets, biases, and common sense. The seven elements of protagonistic agency I have proposed are outward elements which means people challenge things society asks them to do that they no longer want to do. After critically examining my responses to my participants, I realized that I needed to add inward elements to the concept of protagonistic agency, such as constant self-investigation and learning to follow.

Learning to Be a Leader and a Follower: A Dialectical Approach to Positionality

Our group reflected upon each improv game we played. I usually shifted and framed the discussions toward the elements of protagonistic agency. Many of the games I incorporated into the collective creation process (e.g., “I Am a Tree” and “Trust Falls”) supported, explicitly or subtly, the concept of self as “communal creation” (Gergen, 1991, p. 140). I used games to increase awareness of the collective nature and positionality with a collective group. For instance, interpersonal connections are essential for the practice of protagonistic agency. A game like Trust Falls creates more connections among group members. After playing Trust Falls

numerous times, the group came up with guidelines to make it more meaningful. If the circle is too small, the person in the middle had no space to fall—there would be no adventurous experience at all. If the circle is too big, the person in the middle might get physically or psychologically shocked—there would be too much of an adventure. It is never one person's responsibility to support the person in the middle. At least three people shared that duty at any given time—if someone can be helpful, they should not be a bystander. If the supporting group pushes too hard, the person in the middle could fall. In this case, group support turns into group enforcement. Each person in the circle should always be ready to carry the weight of the person in the middle.

Game facilitators do not simply pick up a game from an improv game handbook and start to play it with a group of players. There are layers of frames that need to be taken into consideration in order to play a meaningful and effective game. In the position of the side coach, it is essential to properly frame a game and to wisely direct the reflections of the game. I am still learning to be a better side coach of improv games. The following improv games specifically targeted one's agency through inquiry about leadership and followership.

During the first three sessions, there were several occasions when the group discussed differences between being a leader and being a follower. For instance, after playing the game "Columbian Hypnosis," I asked the group if they preferred to be a leader or a follower in real life. I tried to make the leader/follower dynamic more dialectical by introducing the following concepts based on my participants' accounts (e.g., a veiled agency, a collective agency, agencies in different positions). These concepts came to my mind when I was talking with my participants. I refined and incorporated some of them into the new version of protagonistic agency since I only verbally shared with my group these dialectical concepts on

agency/leadership. During the fourth session, I chose the games Colombian Hypnosis (the group version) and “Camera Above” to provide my group members with some physical experiences related to leadership, power relationships, and agency. I purposefully picked a few participants who were relatively quieter and seemingly less enthusiastic when it came to assuming the role of leader, so they could have space to experience different positionalities in a group.

In the game, Camera Above (see Figure 7), the leader or the group decided on the number(s) or the word they were going to work on (e.g., *love* or *256*). The leader used the bodies of the group participants to fashion the symbol they selected. Their task was to imagine there was a camera above the group and the camera would capture the word or number. In Camera Above, each person had the opportunity to lead. In the final round, the group worked together without a designated leader to create the desired symbol. After the game, our group members started to evaluate everyone’s leadership styles and preferences for the leader or follower position (see Table 24). In the end, I realized I could have directed the discussion to focus on a dialectic versus binary approach to the relationship between a leader and a follower.

Figure 7. Camera Above game.

Table 24

Juxtaposing Individual Leadership with Collective Leadership

Game process	The leader's journal reflections on agency & power
<p>Round 1: Qi Li is the leader (see Figure 7, right). Qi Li's task was to construct the word <i>love</i>. Before making any moves, she stood still for 20 seconds. After constructing <i>l</i>, <i>o</i>, and <i>v</i>, she remained absolutely still again for another 36 seconds. In the end, she spent 3 minutes and 20 seconds to finish writing the word <i>love</i>.</p>	<p>Qi Li: "It is fun to be a leader. However, I am lacking leadership skills. Even though I am passionate and motivated, but still not enough to be a leader. We should choose the right person to be in the right position." Qi Li: "It is much easier to be a follower. However, how to speak up as a follower? I was reminded of dictatorship—if one person makes all the decisions, the whole team will be at stake. Really scary to think about! When it comes to a <i>Shi-Men</i>, as a follower, I found it difficult to find a proper way to make my voice heard. I have to try harder to make myself a better person!"</p>
<p>Round 2: Xiao Si is the leader (see Figure 7, left). It took Xiao Si 2 mins 26 seconds to construct the number 23. She used four people to make 2.</p>	<p>Xiao Si: "I enjoyed the game on the university field. I am not confident with my authority. As a leader, my main goal was to make each one physically comfortable."</p>
<p>Round 3: Collective leadership The group finished constructing <i>NENU</i> in 40 seconds.</p>	<p>Da Lin: "In certain circumstances, no leader is needed." Angie: "Collective leadership in this scenario is more efficient and more fun."</p>
Teammates' Onsite Journal Reflections	
<p>(After examining Qi Li and Xiao Si's leadership styles, Guo Li, Da Lin, and Xiao Xin all emphasized on the importance of a leader's characteristics—confident, decisive, and efficient.) Guo Li: "Qi Li's personality matches her leadership style—too much negotiation. A leader should be more decisive, for the sake of efficiency." Da Lin: "When only the leader leads, it is really frustrating to be a follower because the follower cannot give suggestions. To what extent can freedom of speech help the development of the group/society? Or interfere in the reproduction of the established order? Maybe it is safer to exercise freedom of speech in a small group, rather than a broader range, such as a nation." Guo Li: "Really love our games! I begin to look forward to each week's games; meanwhile, I feel sad that our sessions are approaching the end."</p>	

Critical educators and playbuilding practitioners problematize the dichotomy of leaders and followers. Monzó (2013) critiqued the Western notion of leadership and advocated "learning to follow," which is to "actively work against the onslaught of cultural symbols and expectations of 'leading' to which we have been socialized and on which many of us have based our

professional success” (p. 375). Norris argued a good teacher leads from behind and a good leader listens; you cannot lead without following and you cannot follow without leading (personal communication, March 17, 2020).

In retrospect, what I had not taken into consideration at the time was the dialectical relationship between leader and follower. I fell into this trap of utilizing a traditional positivist paradigm when I agreed with my participants and prioritized efficiency as a key characteristic of a good leader without problematizing our dichotomized mindset. My participants and I are living in a world that encourages competition and values time as money. We could be easily bought into this efficiency-driven mentality. Had I challenged it right at that moment, the whole project might have had different results, even though the whole collective creation process was meant to be a firsthand experience on collective leadership style. During the research project, the group discussed different agency formations, such as a follower’s agency and collective responsibility or collective agency. Even though I tried to keep this new leadership concept in mind when I facilitated any group activities, on that particular day, it slipped my mind.

As a facilitator, I owe my participants a robust conversation in order to readdress the dialectical relationship between leader and follower or a dialectical approach to positionality. I have learned to conduct continued self-investigation to improve my ability as a facilitator and to make sure that I align my action with my principles. Protagonistic agency is not about efficiency. It is, instead, about constant evolving, learning from mistakes, and collective well-being, which could be time-consuming; however, time is not a one-dimensional measuring tape. Time should be about constantly readjusting positionalities in order to learn, to love, to support, to act, to reflect, and to act again for the common good.

Collective Praxis: A Combination of Self-Enlightenment and Mutual Enlightenment

Prior to, during, and after my research project, I engaged in many challenging discussions with my critical friends on some ethical, epistemological, or political implications of this research project. One of my critical friends, Chen, asked, “When a classroom is no longer a traditional classroom, what is the limit of your research project?” He challenged me on the limit of a research project because he believes self-enlightenment is the highest form of enlightenment; he stated, “The moment you try to plant your values within somebody or implement your values with others in the name of enlightenment, you are acting against the principle of enlightenment.” I believe a teacher has a role to play in students’ development, in a relational, mutual-benefiting manner. I do not entirely agree with Chen’s position on enlightenment, but I tried to reconcile and balance his belief and my belief because I soon realized the importance of this balance.

After reading the first draft of the final performance script, Chen teased out three critical elements in the script: a classroom setting, some potential conflicts, and some theatrical scenes that were based upon my group members’ real schooling experiences. Since I wrote and added Act 4 (i.e., relationships between theory and practice or between academia and a life outside of academia), Chen regarded Act 4 as an enforced ideology from me. Chen’s axial message was that I should not enforce my ideology or value system on others, especially since I claim to be a Freirean or Marxist scholar. Since all Chinese students have to study Marx’s theory from middle school through to the PhD level, and Marx’s theory was taught in schools mainly through a banking model, Marx’s theory lost its power in explaining and changing the world; and thereafter, its attraction to learners. I was inspired to write this act after attending a lecture on campus given by famous Chinese Marxist Professor Zheng-Yu Sun on how Marx’s theory could

be used as a powerful tool to transform self and society. I did not learn Marx's theory the way Professor Sun presented. I was too eager to share with the students how powerful Marxist theory could be. Chen, without denying the power of Marx's theory, firmly believes the highest manifestation of enlightenment is self-enlightenment. I incorporated part of our conversation to carry Chen's concerns to my research project:

Chen: "If it is theatrical in the formation, how do you incorporate the educational elements? If your goals are to practice protagonistic agency and to raise critical consciousness, can a few classes/workshops fulfill your goals? Do we have other ways to accomplish your goals, other than a theatrical formation?"

Angie: "The research itself is like planting the seeds of critical consciousness and showing the students possibilities for making changes. The research is also a theatrical rehearsal for real-time social actions. Social actions are physical movements. Theatrical exercises train the body and the mind. Body and mind are highly connected. They constrain or strengthen one another."

Chen: "You are going to plant the seed of critical consciousness. I use similar phrases like 'free will' and 'the capacity of free practice' in my dissertation. What I want to say is that there is a limit to everything. When my dissertation committee asked me where I can implement my ideal enlightenment, I could not offer one because all the values are socially constructed, and we all participate in the process of reproducing values."

Angie: "But the idea of a seed is not a doctrine."

Chen: "Still, it is a paradoxical situation: The moment you try to plant your values within somebody or implement your values with others in the name of enlightenment, you are acting against the principle of enlightenment because the highest level of enlightenment is self-liberation and self-enlightenment. Again, what is your limit in your research? Dealing with those 'naturally occurring conflicts' during your research process, you must have preinstalled many underlying purposes. For instance, you encourage your participants to create and draft their script collectively. After the first round of the group creation, you think what they have produced was 'too low.' This could be taken as evidence that you are depositing your ideology to the students, like Freire's banking model of education. You talk about humanitarianism, and you talk about treating people as people. But what you have done is not humanitarian at all."

Angie: "I told my participants that I am a Marxist. I am not a metaphysician. I have adopted a Marxist historical materialist perspective to analyze everyday events. Each person in my research team is encouraged to share using their own philosophical perspectives so that we can compare and reflect on our views. The themes of our conversations are not preset. We collect our ideas through casual conversations onsite."

Chen: “We have attached too many add-ons to one thing. For example, working was simply a survival need; then, it becomes a tool for cultivation. A house was only a shelter; then, it becomes a symbol of social status. Now we are trying to reframe a classroom with our preset purposes. Will that still be a classroom? Yes, I understand that you have a good intention. But the process of implementation might turn against your good intention.”

Angie: “Yes, I do have my purposes. We all need purposes to find and produce meanings. I believe there is a need here for a space to reflect and to act. I have heard so many stories of students feeling lost and wandering about aimlessly at this point in their lives. My purpose is to provide a space for my team members to reflect on their lives.”

Chen: “Your research formation could attempt to generalize the concept of enlightenment. When I was defending my dissertation, I was asked: ‘Do you think a teacher, as an intellectual, can enlighten students?’”

Angie: “A teacher should be allowed to have the intention.”

Chen: “Not exactly. It is not about whether the teacher wants to or not. It is a paradox in itself because what we are talking about here is the highest level of enlightenment, which is self-enlightenment.”

Angie: “From a Marxist perspective, we are social beings; and we are socially ‘enlightened’ through interacting with others and the society in general. One of the most significant contributions of Marx was to explain why it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. I don’t believe in self-enlightenment in the purest sense. My research is about knowing and developing oneself in relationship to others, and through interacting with others.”

Chen: “There is a 2008 German sociopolitical thriller film called Die Welle [The Wave]. You should watch it. Your research shares some similarities with the classroom experiment illustrated in that film.”

Looking back, my conversation with Chen revealed a hard fact about how easy it is for a teacher/facilitator to see their students as missing something—deficit theorizing. At that time, my standard or expectation regarding my participants was that their stories must be connected to theory and the broader society. Since they did not meet this expectation of mine in the first draft of the script, I added Act 4 myself to address it. What went wrong was not my expectations, but the way I enforced my expectations when my participants were not yet ready. Chen was trying to say that teachers often see students as culturally deficient, not intellectuals and therefore they

have a tendency to “fix” the student. He was right on this. From a constructivist point of view, real learning comes from the student. A popular Chinese saying goes, “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.” When the student is ready in life to listen and to transform, they are receptive and self-enlightened to hear from others—the opportunity of collective praxis—the moment of simultaneous self-enlightenment and social enlightenment in praxis.

Student Voice as a Precondition to Protagonistic Agency

After the final performance, some of my participants expressed their divergent opinions on the theme selection. Qi Li confessed she thought Act 2 was not an exciting topic while Da Li thought the same act was not significant enough.

Qi Li: “I was a bit disappointed because the main themes we had decided on in the end to present were not interesting ones for me. We had talked about so many interesting topics, such as ‘how others affect us’ or ‘perform and hide.’”

Angie: “But I incorporated many of these elements in Scene 4, Act 2 in our performance.”

Qi Li: “They were not treated as the main themes though. But, considering what you want is graduate students’ life, classroom is a big chunk.”

Da Li: “I remember one scene: A teacher in the classroom arranges student presentations. Since I was the teacher, I remember it well. But I really think it was an insignificant topic though.”

In the final performance as a group, we might not have addressed some of the themes my participants loved the most, but my participants co-created and lived through all the themes in the process of building the final show, which in itself is meaningful. Qi Li respected and prioritized my research interests. She made compromises without letting me know during the group devising stage. I am a *Shi-Jie* to my participants, which means I have a higher level in the elaborate status system for graduate students. My higher status limited my participants from voicing their divergent opinions. “It is your research after all,” Qi Li said after telling me she thought the choices for the final performance were not interesting enough. I consciously worked

on managing my power status with my participants. For instance, during our information session, I tried to decrease the power imbalance by deliberately lowering my status and opening up to the participants. “You can always convince us,” Qi Li added when I asked her why she did not tell me her opinion. When reading my dissertation draft, my mentor stated, “I noticed that you generally had the last word in a group discussion. What does that mean to everyone else?” At one point when writing this dissertation, I realized I might have mistaken the role of an “explainer” of the research project with the role of a democratic participant in a group setting. Maintaining and balancing one’s status and positionality in a group is a continuous effort. I have learned from my mistakes. That was the most valuable part of the process. I am pleased that the participants chose to share their feelings after the performance to help me see my blind spots. My unconscious urge to push for the moment of enlightenment silenced their voices. I have learned to provide conditions, time, and space for students/participants to get ready to learn, but I need to be patient with them. Student voice is not just about risk-taking or speaking out, but involves a person who is conscious and confident about who they are in relationship to everyone else and to society. Student voice is a precondition to protagonistic agency because one cannot act or perform as a socially responsible individual without first naming their own identities.

Learning About Critical Citizenry: Telling Chinese Stories in and Outside of China

Chen recommended that I watch the 2008 German sociopolitical thriller film *Die Welle* [The Wave]. I watched the movie and presumed that by directing my attention to this movie, Chen was warning me of my vulnerability to be manipulated by powerful interest groups or of the potential social consequences of having a political veneer to my work. One of my inspirations to conduct this research was the Boal’s story that I shared in Chapter 1. Boal (1995) questioned, “How can artists not be part of the struggle?” I was aware of the potential social

consequences. *Enacting agency* means to face consequences and to deal with accountability. My participants and I were presenting ideas as one group. I was part of their struggles; they were part of my struggles. I did recognize that the participants came from different social networks than me. I was relatively protected because of my outsider position in the university community. It is my ethical duty as a critical researcher to make sure the research project does not put my participants at risk since they held a relatively higher stake in the university community and the country. During the research process and the final performance, I declared that I would take all responsibility if the research project was criticized in any way. The freedom to enact on the world always comes with responsibility. Freire (2003) stated:

The “fear of freedom” . . . afflicts the oppressed. . . . One of the essential elements of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed is prescription. . . . Thus, the behavior of the oppressed is a prescribed behavior, following as it does the guidelines of the oppressor. . . . Freedom would require them to reject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility. (pp. 46–47)

When conducting this research project in China, I was challenged by another doctoral student in China. He asked why I chose to conduct my research in China with Chinese students. He was trying to remind me of my potentially delicate position as a Chinese scholar who writes Chinese stories mainly for readers outside of China. I interpreted his message as reflecting the mentality of “never airing your dirty laundry in public.” He likely suspected that I might expose some “ugly facts” about Chinese students and Chinese society to the English-speaking world. Of course, that is not my intention at all; however, if I do not handle my research project properly, I could be perceived by some Chinese people as a potential traitor who is about to paint an ugly portrait of China for the world to review and critique. I have to ask myself: What is my

obligation as a Chinese citizen? How can I conduct a constructive and fair critique without being perceived as a traitor? The famous artist, Ai Weiwei inarguably failed this test. Ai is known internationally as an artist and human rights activist. In China, to some Chinese people, he is a rightfully censored artist and an anti-government traitor; while most Chinese people have never heard of him.

In this section, I used my philosophical, psychological, and political struggles as examples to connect to a broader Chinese context. I am living in the United States during the 2020 global coronavirus pandemic. For the past few years, I have been traveling to China once or twice every year to work with Chinese university communities and to visit my family members; and I plan to continue working closely with Chinese university communities. I have family members and friends living in the United States and in China. I read English and Chinese news daily. I am glad to see doctors, not movie stars, become national heroes. I saw solidarity and love among people and heard prayers, encouraging slogans, and chanting from all over the world. I have read entries by people who are in the pandemic centers, who are willing to use their eyes, hearts, bodies, and voices to share what they have witnessed and experienced. Those voices and stories connect us during this global crisis. Simultaneously, I hear criticism about doctors' high salaries and writers' negative depictions of the situation. *Fangfang Diary*, depicting life in Wuhan where the pandemic started, was among the hottest controversies in China during the pandemic. Fangfang wrote one entry each day and posted them through a friend's Wechat public account. Her entries connected and warmed lonely and aggrieved souls both in and outside Wuhan. Meanwhile, these entries were increasingly criticized as they gained popularity. Criticism grew stronger when *Fangfang Diary* was translated into English, now known as *Wuhan Diary*, and could be preordered on Amazon. On various Chinese social media pages,

Fangfang was portrayed as a traitor, an irresponsible citizen, and an opportunist; she was roundly demonized. Fangfang became an enemy of the people. Suddenly, on behalf of the nation, citizens played the role of censorship police. China's President Xi repeatedly urged the media and publishing industry to "tell China stories well" (Yang, 2019; Zhang, 2016). I understand that many people who criticized Fangfang for her diary's foreign publication have good intentions—to defend China from being discriminated against or criticized by other nations or individuals. Does this mean that Chinese citizens can only tell the bright side of a story? Will that be trustworthy? Why are so many Chinese citizens so afraid of showing imperfect stories about their nation?

I witnessed a similar mentality in my participants. In the questionnaire, Qi Li and Xiao Xin expressed that they were afraid of exposing their weaknesses in front of the group members. Qi Li also told a story about how she had learned to not keep focusing on others' flaws, but on their strengths. I relate this phenomenon of lacking confidence to the fact that many of my participants were taught only to focus on individual level agency—meaning competing with each other and seeing others as mainly competitors.

This is why I advocate for the process of meaning-making on both collective and public levels. I believe in constructing and making meanings in relationship with others; I believe in collective voice and agency, and I support a cooperative way of being. As a researcher, and future educator, I promote the idea that teachers are obligated to provide conditions of possibilities for students to transform and thrive. Meanwhile students, as unique human beings, offer teachers inspiration and perspectives from which to grow. This is the position of Paulo Freire and the position of Confucius. I do not feel guilty or fearful of being the light of the world

or to show the shadow behind the light. Each individual is incomplete. People should come together for a shared goal of working for the happiness of all humanity.

Future Research Implications

During our collective creation process, my participants and I co-created and experienced various spaces/stages to collectively problem-pose personal experiences and social norms, translate ideas into theatrical form, and theatrically perform elements of their lives as protagonistic agents. Those stages included a group discussion stage (we conducted case studies in the 4th session), an authentic conversational stage (we met international critical pedagogues in the 5th session), a classroom presentational stage (we organized an improv game workshop after the 5th session), an improvised performative stage (we devised our scripts in the 6th session), and a scripted performance and live discussion stage (in the final performance). I have elaborated in great details what happened to my participants and to me in the above spaces/stages. I believe there are great potential, in creating and exploring those spaces in the classroom, to expand the meaning and the nature of a classroom, and to make the classroom a magical space for individuals to grow and flourish as protagonistic agents.

The concept of protagonistic agency was created in this dissertation; however, the various components of the protagonistic agency have been forming and transforming in my mind for many years before the invention of the concept. The created term of protagonistic agency helps me frame what it means to be a critical citizen, a public intellectual, a meaningful researcher, and other roles I might have an opportunity to play in my life. This research project was intended to be a critical pedagogy research. Some of my future research plans include to continue the effort of reinventing critical pedagogy in China and to conduct further research on the theatrical

elements of protagonistic agency (e.g., how archetypes, as a form of the collective unconscious, connect people across space and time).

Reinventing Critical Pedagogy in Chinese Higher Education Classrooms

Human beings have always learned from each other across cultures, nation states, and ethnicities. There exist dangers or contradictions when it comes to issues, such as power differentiation, decoloniality, and localization. From a critical and decolonial perspective, Freire (1978, 1997a) reminded progressive educators to reinvent, not to transplant, his ideas. From the perspective of localization, Chinese Scholar Yu (2014) adopted the concept of *other's theory* (他者理论) to refer to theory that originated and developed in another land or another culture for the purpose of explaining specific phenomena or resolving special problems. In this context, *other* does not mean marginalized groups relative to the dominant group; rather, *other* means a different culture or a different social context. Yu (2014) recognized the value of different ideas by referring to an old Chinese saying, “Stones from other mountains could be used to carve and polish our jade (他山之石, 可以攻玉).”

Between 2015 and 2019, three international conferences on critical pedagogy were held in China at two university campuses.³⁸ Dr. Yu (my Chinese mentor) and his team were the host of the first two conferences. I was involved in all three conferences as a member of the organizing team and a conference presenter. The Chinese advocates of critical pedagogy and some international critical pedagogues have been working on introducing and critically

³⁸ The first and the second international critical pedagogy conferences were held at Northeast Normal University in Changchun in 2015 and 2018 with the themes of “Marx, Mao, Freire & critical pedagogy” and “educating for children’s good life,” respectively. The third international critical pedagogy was held at South China Normal University in Guangzhou in 2019 with the theme of “human nature education.” When I was conducting my research in China in 2018, the second critical pedagogy conference was held on my research campus. Some of my American professors were keynote speakers (many are also members of my Paulo Freire Democratic Project family: Dr. Suzanne SooHoo, Dr. Anaida Colón-Muñiz, Dr. Lilia Monzó, and Dr. Cathery Yeh). Some of my research participants and I presented at the conference.

localizing critical pedagogy in China. My dissertation, as critical pedagogy research, was part of that effort.

Theatrical Explorations for Collective Human Connections

I identify as a Marxist who looks at the world from a structural and systemic perspective. Marx (2012) explained human nature through three pairs of relations: (a) between human beings and their living conditions (i.e., the needs of human beings as a natural attribute); (b) between human beings and their activities (i.e., human being's the of human beings as a distinct characteristic); and (c) relationships between and among human beings (i.e., the ensemble of social relations as the essence of being human; p. 32). I choose to do my work "on the ground" with what I perceive to be vulnerable groups of people. I am humbled to listen and to learn from individuals who bring their unique upbringings, knowledge, and stories to our collective group. I also am ambitious because I aim for ways to connect human beings across various cultures, nationalities, ethnicities, genders, and social classes. Inarguably, the world has been more divided than connected. I look for harmony that embraces diversity. Therefore, it makes sense to me to take a dialectical approach in life—to be humble and ambitious; to make concrete connections and to reflect abstractly/philosophically; to walk in small steps and to dream big dreams; to appreciate differences; and to look for something simple, deeply rooted, and universally shared.

As the initiator of this research project, I intended to promote and celebrate a collective way of being. I have been contemplating and researching ways for human beings to live collectively, not in abstract relationships; not in the realm of ideology, but through praxis. My belief in a collective way of being explains the research project taking the form of a collective creation. This also explains the way I related to my participants. I was there to be part of the

collective self and be a connected individual. One of the primary purposes of the games played was to learn to be a collective self. There were some positive impacts of being a big sister for my participants. By revealing my vulnerability and genuine care, I became a big sister to my participants. I proved to my participants that I was not an objective researcher who was there to steal their stories, their emotions, and their souls or to claim their experiences as my own. I intended to be a project initiator and a team member in the trust circle I formed with them. I was a listener, but also heard by others. We cried together, laughed together, ate together, played together, and performed together. Before we met, each of us remained buried within our own stories. From the time we met, we collectively constructed stories in a shared time and space with our bodies and minds. We generated versions of collective stories. We carried our shared memories and continued to construct the next chapter of our lives. We can never claim that we have nothing to do with each other's life. During the 5th session, some of the group members expressed how much they loved the group:

Guo Li: "I feel very safe with you [Angie] because you sincerely want to help me resolve problems. You are like my real Angel. You have rescued me many times. I feel sad that our group project is so close to the end. I have already started to count our remaining sessions. I want to see you again next year!"

Angie: "Ohhh, I am about to cry now."

Xiao Xin: "Me too! I feel very safe to be with our group, too. First, I feel our mutual trust. Second, at the very beginning, we agreed not to share our stories with people outside of our group."

After our final performance, Xiao Si reflected: "Normally, I prefer doing things myself. I don't usually take the initiative to get together with others. Being here, though, makes me feel that I don't have to be cautious. And I feel close to our group mates. Therefore, I love the atmosphere. For me, Angie is brave, legendary, stylish, rich in emotion, and pure. She reminds me of a legendary Chinese female writer, San-Mao."

Xiao Si wrote to me a few months after our research project and expressed that whenever she experienced difficulties, she often thought of my stories, which gave her strength and courage to continue in her struggles. It is always a great feeling to hear and witness what my participants have said about themselves as transformed individuals, aware and appreciative of a new group identity.

Forging human relationships in daily life is a pedagogical process and an ontological pursuit. I keep asking questions: What connects us? How can we form deeper human connections? And how do people fathom the theoretical depth and the geographical scope of their connections with others? American civil rights activist Pauli Murray (1945) wrote, “When my brothers try to draw a circle to exclude me, I shall draw a larger circle to include them” (p. 24). I intended to find ways to draw bigger and bigger circles in my life to practice the principle of inclusion and collectivism. Then I stepped into the world of improvisation and theatre and experienced profound human connections.

When we examine theatre/drama based on its origin, theatre/drama gives expression to the collective unconsciousness of humankind. Some great plays in history remain relevant to the viewers, often because of the undercurrent of the plot (or archetype), not the plot itself (Sun, 1998). Jung (1947) explained archetypes as images and thoughts, which have universal meanings across cultures, and which may show up in dreams, literature, art, or religion. The collective unconscious is filled with archetypes—as both content and form.

Anderson (2006) distinguished a vertical way of apprehending time from the horizontal dimension of time. In modern day, people perceive time and space as homogenous and empty, filled by coincidences and marked by clock and calendar. French anthropologist Cassirer (1994) stated,

In mythical thought, space and time are never considered as pure or empty forms. They are regarded as the great mysterious forces which govern all things, which rule and determine not only our mortal life but also the life of the gods. (p. 63)

The four typical phases of the resurrection myth—birth, life/suffering, death, and resurrection—define the sequence/time and format/space of the ancient sacrificial ceremony, which transformed into four (or five) phases of a theatrical structure: exposition, rising action, climax, and falling action (with a *dénouement*) (Sun, 1998). In Greek mythology, Dionysus resurrected; in the world of Christianity, Jesus resurrected; in China, Hou Ji, a legendary Chinese culture hero, experienced resurrection (Sun, 1998). Cassirer (1944) argued one cannot understand the mythical world with modern intellectual reduction or scientific/empirical reasoning, nor by Freudian sexual deduction. Cassirer (1944) explained the inherent coherence of myth poetically:

What interests us in empirical thought are the constant features of our sense experience. Here we always make a distinction between what is substantial or accidental, necessary or contingent, invariable or transient. By this discrimination we are led on to the concept of a world of physical objects endowed with fixed and determinate qualities. But all this involves an analytical process that is opposed to the fundamental structure of mythical perception and thought. The mythical world is, as it were, at a much more fluid and fluctuating stage than our theoretical world of things and properties, of substances and accidents. . . . The world of myth is a dramatic world—a world of actions, of forces, of conflicting powers. In every phenomenon of nature, it sees the collision of these powers. Mythical perception is always impregnated with these emotional qualities. Whatever is seen or felt is surrounded by a special atmosphere—an atmosphere of joy or grief, or anguish, of excitement, of exultation or depression. (pp. 102–103)

The coherence of the mythical world relies on the unit of emotions, not logic (Sun, 1998). In the mythical world when history was not written, illiterate masses could not perceive history as an endless chain of causal effects. It was their emotional connection with the myths, which was very often carried or manifested by rituals or other religious practices that carried them when encountering turmoil. People became connected through their shared vertical connection to those myths (Sun, 1998).

People who are not familiar with these theatrical and mythical epistemologies might be able to learn through exploration in the mythical and theatrical world that could help to balance contemporary feelings of isolation and alienation, and build the emotional foundation for becoming a more connected protagonistic agent—someone who is always ready to be part of and responsible for a world larger than herself.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Recruitment Script (or Invitation Letter)

Dear graduate student,

My name is Yan Wang. As a graduate student at Chapman University, I am required to conduct this research as part of the requirements for a Doctorate degree in Cultural and Curricula Studies. It will be conducted under the supervision of Dr. Suzanne SooHoo, from Chapman University.

I am conducting a research project entitled: Playbuilding experiences with Chinese graduate students: A participatory arts-based research project.

The project proposes to collectively design a student-generated, cross-disciplinary theatrical performance in the university setting, with an emphasis on students' reflections and actions (what Paulo Freire called Praxis) upon students' daily lives, and with a goal of providing a robust space for transformational experiences to take place both individually and collectively. During this collective research project, participants are expected to share and expand with one another versions of their personal stories, experiences and realities, and turn them into theatrical performances, in order to generate dialogue within the research group and with the audience, critically embrace multiple perspectives or realities, and celebrate human potentialities. Those are the kind of transformational experiences I hope to happen.

The research project consists of participation in 2 Focus groups and 10 weeks of Playbuilding sessions (roughly June–August 2018)³⁹: three sessions each week, and 2 hours per session (about 60 hours in total), on Northeast Normal University campus. There will also be 1 to 3 final performances and post-show discussions on campus in the end, the dates to be determined towards the end of the project. The entire data collecting/gathering process will be conducted in Chinese.

If you decide to participate in this project, you have to realize that it will be a significant time commitment (over 60 hours). Other than scheduled sessions; extra rehearsal times and performances will be set with all group members to ensure that a convenient time is found. If the time commitment is altogether too much, but you are interested in the project, you can attend the performance and post-show dialogue.

As a member of Northeast Normal University (NENU) community, you are invited to participate in this research project because your friend/cohort thinks that you might want to spend time with a person, who:

Has stories to share; trusts the magic power of deep communication; always has faith in collective/group genius; loves performing; loves expressing herself; is willing to expand the threshold of knowledge; challenges the dominant ideology/practice or hegemony; is able to talk about controversial topics/situations; learns to live or be at peace with conflicts; wants to practice counter-arguments; is culturally responsible and courteous and respectful; believes in temporal truth and embraces the idea of “unfinishedness.”

I want to gather a group of people who have shared interests in theatrically/artistically exploring how we understand our language(s), our bodies and our experiences, in relationship to ourselves, to others, and to this world. You don't have to have experiences or a background in

³⁹ This time frame was my plan. But we did not end up following this time frame. My research was conducted from the month of June to the month of July.

theatre or drama. As long as you have faith and passion in the power of a like-minded and multi-intelligent group; as long as you are committed to this upcoming collective project, you are in!

If this project interests you and you would like to consider participating in it, I have a consent form that fully outlines the project, which I would like to send to you, for your review and then have a further conversation if you would like.

Voluntary Participation: The participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If participants do decide to participate, they may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation, EVEN IF IT IS PRIOR TO A PERFORMANCE.

You can meet me in person or contact me by phone at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or through emailing xxxxx@mail.chapman.edu. Below is my and my advisor's contact information.

Name	Role in the research project	University Affiliation	Contact information
Yan Wang	Student investigator	Ph.D. student, Attallah College of Educational Studies (ACES), Chapman University, USA	Email: xxxxx@mail.chapman.edu
Suzanne SooHoo	Advisor; dissertation committee chair	Professor, ACES, Chapman University, USA	Email: soohoo@chapman.edu

Thank you for your consideration of participating in this project. I can ensure you that you will not forget this unique experience easily. I look forward to working with you!

Best regards,
Yan Wang
PhD Candidate

Appendix B

Questionnaire Responses

Table B1

Group Members' Questionnaire Responses (Q1 and Q2)

	Q1: Do you have any previous experiences with theatrical performances?	Q2: What are your general perceptions towards drama?
Xiao Xin	No	Perform; present through a theatrical space; representations of experiences, of rules, of ethics.
Qi Li	Yes Comic skit; sing on stage; was part of a play writing team	Turn people's living experiences into a show; Offer the audience different experiences; The actors experience different lives too.
Da Li	Yes Dance	To tell a meaningful story through our bodies; To melt ourselves together with the role/character; To experience different lives; Feel meaningful and fun.
Da Lin	Yes Comic skit; wrote and rehearsed a play	A way of self-expression Based on real life stories; but go beyond our real life. A kind of art form that carries special ethos.
Jia Lin	Yes	Having the characters, a script, the audience, emotions in a theatrical context. theatre help people reflect on their own lives.
Xiao Si	Yes	I am thinking of those silent film. Powerful silent films. We laugh with tears and deep contemplation.
Guo Li	Yes Comic skit	We try to understand the characters; then present the characters on the stage.
David	No	Theatre is a purposeful presentation of life, with theatrical techniques to exaggerate the artistic presentation.

Table B2

Group Members' Questionnaire Responses (Q3, Q4, and Q5)

	Q3: What brought you here?	Q4: What are your expectations towards our project?	Q5: What are your concerns towards our project?
Xiao Xin	I want to get to know a new experience, and to have new friends. I want to go beyond of my own routine environment, and to observe other's lives.	I also want to amplify my advantages; and to increase my level of self-acceptance.	What if I did not amplify my advantages, but rather amplified my disadvantages?

	Q3: What brought you here?	Q4: What are your expectations towards our project?	Q5: What are your concerns towards our project?
Qi Li	I want to re-examine and reflect on myself through sharing my stories and hearing other's stories.	To see different lives and stories; to better understand myself	I might not be able to participant due to a conflict of schedules. I might find out more disappointing features about myself.
Da Li	I see this opportunity as a spice in my school/campus life; I am interested in this novel research methodology.	I want to make new friends here; and to better understand me and others in this process.	I worry whether I can be truly open in the research process.
Da Lin	I am interested in playbuilding. I wish to learn this methodology by experiencing it.	Make my contribution to the research project; better understand myself and improve my ability to express myself.	I worry whether I could be understood by other team members; and whether my opinions could be useful or effective.
Jia Lin	Firstly, I am interested in drama; secondly, I want to understand what playbuilding is; thirdly, I want to know more like-minded friends through this unique experience and broaden my scope of knowledge.	I wish the group could collectively create a satisfying show. Meanwhile, I wish to be understood by others and to understand myself better as well.	Whether I could contribute to the group work in a meaningful way. Could not finish our group assignments on time.
Xiao Si	One day, all of a sudden, I found myself disliking the "collective lifestyle." I prefer being alone. This collective playbuilding opportunity is a new challenge to me, I wish to get out of my "locked room."	I wish our group could have a great emotional atmosphere throughout the process; the group work together to support Angie's pioneering work.	Whether I could be a committed member of the group. Whether I could be helpful to the group.
Guo Li	I love acting.	I see it as an opportunity to satisfy my acting urge and to enjoy myself.	I worry we might simply construct a dramatic show, but I could not sense the educational significance.
David	Study the relationship between rationality and irrationality.	How rationality and irrationality work when a group of people devise a show with creativity	I might not be able to construct a theory out of some disorganized observations.

Appendix C

Description of Some of the Improvisational Games the Group Played

Up-Side-Down Introduction

Game description: Two players pair up with one player sharing her⁴⁰ stories (for a half minute), the other one listening to the story and paying attention to the storyteller's facial expressions, body language, talking tones, etc. Then we switch roles—the previous storyteller becomes the responsive listener; the previous listener becomes the storyteller. All the pairs share their stories with their partners simultaneously. After one minute (each player talks for a half minute), the group come together in a circle. We have each pair one-by-one to perform in front of the whole group. But this time, each player pretends to be her partner, and share with the group her partner's story as if the story was her own.

Purposes of the game: The game is an exercise on how to be a responsive listener—meaning not only to listen to the content of the conversation, but also to pay attention to what we perceive to be all of the silent signals the storyteller is revealing. Through storytelling, we have the opportunity to know each other more intimately since we are connected by our collective experiences and by our shared memories which we are co-constructing during each session. Do you feel nervous to speak in public? Fearful of failure or public humiliation? If you want to feel comfortable to look at the crowd directly and to allow yourself to be looked at, at the same time, this is a game that could train you to reach your goal.

Game prompt: Share with your partner something about yourself. For instance, what you like/dislike; or what you are fearful of.

One-Word-at-a-Time Mantra

Description of the game: Have participants stand as a circle. Each participant goes around the circle and adds one word at a time to build a sentence/mantra. Once the group has come to a natural conclusion of the mantra, they will snap and say, “Yes, yes, yes, yes!”

Purposes of the game: The game challenges the general understanding of the ‘group’ as merely a collection of individuals, explores and demonstrates the idea that the ‘group’ has its own distinct identity. It poses the idea that if we collectively pay attention to the development and the flow of the group and the welfare of others, it takes the focus away from ourselves, pushes us into the unexpected, and paradoxically improves our chances of personal discovery and growth. The games and exercises are intended to break old habits of controlling and to experience another kind of being, called collective being, which is more relaxing. The fundamental basis of all of this is improvisation. In order to be fully present, we cannot plan ahead. We just need to be relaxed and have fun with those whimsical or bizarre sentences the group comes up with. We will learn to trust the instinct of the group; to be obvious; and not to try too hard to be creative.

Zip, Zap, Boing, and Freak Out

Game description: The group stand in a circle and pass along a Zip or a Zap or call out a Boing or a Freak out.

Zip: One person (say, Jim) starts the game by saying “Zip” while clap once. Meanwhile, Jim turns his face toward the person next to him (either to his left or right), with his eyes looking at the person's eyes and one of his hands pointing at the person, which means Jim passes a “zip” to a person next to him. The

⁴⁰ I use “she, her” instead of “he/she, his/her” when I describe a game, only to make it easier for me to describe a game, and for my reader to understand a game.

second person (say Sue) passes “Zip” to the person next to her in the same direction. In other words, “Zip” means to pass “Zip” one-by-one towards one direction.

Zip: “Zip” means to interrupt the flow created by “Zips” by pointing to anyone in the circle, except for the two persons beside you. A tricky part of “Zip” is that the person who delivers “Zip” needs to deliver a clear message, which means to look at your targeted person in the eyes; to point your hand toward the targeted person at the same time. All the players in the circle have to pay full attention to the game because a “Zip” could be delivered to you at any time. Two “Zaps” cannot be delivered one after another together (or a Zap has to be followed by Zip), in order to allow Zips to restart another flow.

Boing: Say, Jim passes a “Zip” to Sue. Instead of passing along another “Zip” to the next person, Sue responds to Jim with a “Boing” by turning her body toward Jim, jumping in the air with her arms stretched upward, and saying “Boing” to Jim. Jim then has to turn around to face the other person next to him; and deliver a “zip.” Therefore, Boing means to bounce back to the opposite direction. “Boing” only bounces back “zip.”

Finally, “Freak out” means everybody runs to another random person’s position. When everybody finds his/her new position, the person called “Freak out” restarts the game with a “Zip.”

Purposes of a warm-up game: I use this game as a warm-up game. To focus the mind or to be present; to relax the body; and to feel comfortable with the space where the class/activity is going to take place. Therefore, it is about the combination of space, time, and physicality. Interestingly, some of the participants associated the game with different personalities in their verbal and written reflections.

Color and Advance

A quick description of the game goes: One player tells an improvised story while the rest of the players call “advance” to indicate the storyteller to advance the action/story and “color” to ask the storyteller to describe in detail on what the storyteller had just said. I learned and practices this game in Theresa’s class.

Purposes of the game: This is a game with great potential. It can provide participants with the opportunity to share our stories concisely, and with precision, using a proper amount of detail (color) and the right tempo (advance).

Columbian Hypnosis

Game description: The basic form of the game involves two students working in pairs as one student closely follows another student’s hands movement. This activity requires mutual trust, awareness, and nonverbal communication as students move together safely through space. There can be many variations of the game. For instance, one person to two other persons—with each hand leading one person; one person to four additional persons—with both hands and both feet leading four persons. One person is designated as the leader, and the others as the followers. Spolin (1999) calls this variation, “Mirror/Follow the Follower” (p. 62). One person leads a group—with each follower focusing on one part of the leading person. In this last variation of the game, the leader should move in one direction only, and in slow motion, because the rest of the group’s movement will be exaggerated.

Trust Falls

Game description: I appropriated this game from Joe Norris’s book—*Playbuilding as qualitative research*. Here is Joe’s description of the activity: “*One form of Trust Falls has a person in the center of a tight circle of four to 10 others who catch the person as he/she falls, keeping waist and knees tight. The catchers then restore the person to center, and she/he falls again. The falling could be forward, backward, to one side or the other. All points of the compass are possible. Two or more participants*

assist in the catching" (Norris, 2009, p. 31). Once the support group achieves a rhythm, the person in the center can ask for more space. So, the circle steps back, which creates space for longer falls.

In our version of the game, if the participation in the middle has enough trust towards the support group, she/her could close their eyes; If she/he feels nervous at the very beginning, she/he does not have to close their eyes.

"I Am" Poem

Game description: "I Am" poem constitutes three stanzas. Students just have to fill out the blanks with their pens and their hearts. In our version of the game, after finishing writing the poem, the participants all stood up and created a circle with their poems in their hands. Each participant read one line of the poem, until everyone finished reading all the lines in the poem. Below is the prompt of the poem.

"I Am" Poem

FIRST STANZA

I am _____ (two special characteristics you have)
I wonder _____ (something of curiosity)
I hear _____ (an imaginary sound)
I see _____ (an imaginary sight)
I want _____ (an actual desire)
I am _____ (the first line of the poem repeated)

SECOND STANZA

I pretend _____ (something you actually pretend to do)
I feel _____ (a feeling about something imaginary)
I touch _____ (an imaginary touch)
I worry _____ (something that bothers you)
I cry _____ (something that makes you sad)
I am _____ (the first line of the poem repeated)

THIRD STANZA

I understand _____ (something that is true)
I say _____ (something you believe in)
I dream _____ (something you dream about)
I try _____ (something you really make an effort about)
I hope _____ (something you actually hope for)
I am _____ (the first line of the poem repeated)

Appendix D

Initial Coding of the Activities in the First Four Sessions

Table D1

Initial Coding of Group Activities (Information session and First Session)⁴¹

Session & Content		Quotations/scenarios	Versus Codes	Types of Interactions
1	Information session Game: Up-side-down Introduction	Da Li: “My saddest thing is that lately I have been fooling around with you guys a lot without studying much” Jia Lin: “I am outgoing; I like to sing, dance, play with kids, and do sports. I have been quite busy lately. If I can successfully manage everything, I would feel a strong sense of accomplishment.”	Play—Study Manage everything in life—a sense of accomplishment	Principle of behaviors (Time management)
2	Information session Game: Up-side-down Introduction	Xiao Xin: “I am anxious recently; I don't know the reason.” “I have not been feeling happy; I try to hide my unhappiness with a smile”	Anxiety/unhappiness—disguise with a smile	Principle of behaviors (Emotion management)
3	Information session Game: Up-side-down Introduction	Xiao Si: “I like new things; at the same time, I am afraid of new things.” Guo Li: “I love acting.” Qi Li: “I love to eat. But I am busy with losing weight lately. I love to wander around. I don’t like to stay at home for too long.”	Attitude to new things: like and afraid of love to eat—need to lose weight Wander around—stay at home	Views of life (self-evaluation)

⁴¹ Table D1 and Table D2

share the same header row. Column 1 (Session & content) follows the chronological order of each playbuilding session. Column 2 (Quotations/scenarios) carries the quotations (or descriptions of the relevant scenarios) I have chosen to represent each event in Column 1. Column 3 (versus codes): I use pairs of usually dichotomous or binary terms (X vs. Y) to categorize the tensions presented in the quotations/scenarios in Column 2. Meanwhile, the codes under Column 3 constitute our potential theatrical themes/topics for our subsequent sessions. Column 4 (forms of interactions) contains the abstractions of the versus codes in Column 3.

Session & Content		Quotations/scenarios	Versus Codes	Types of Interactions
4	After the information session	A Homework for my participants: list 3 of your favorite movies and explain why you chose them.	Movies—views of life	views of life
5	1 st session (I); conversations generated from the topic of movies ⁴²	Xiao Si: “I often wonder—are we living our lives or are we merely surviving?”	Living—surviving	views of life (philosophy of life)
6	1 st session (I); conversations generated from the topic of movies	Guo Li: “why graduate school? Dose it worth attending?... I had an opportunity to continue graduate school under the Direct Admission policy. So here I am. I did not think it through. But people would say, if you were working for 3 years instead of attending a graduate school, you could have been promoted.”	Unintentional choice—other’s opinions	Principle of behaviors (decision-making strategies)
7	1 st session (I); conversations generated from the topic of movies	Angie: “In the movie, the organization treats cloned humans as merely organ donors, because the organization believes those donors do not have souls or consciousness. We have to treat each other with dignity because as human beings, we are self-conscious. What is the point of having consciousness if we don’t use it critically? ”	Conscious being—human being	views of life (philosophy of life) Agency (innate agency)
8	1 st session (I); conversations generated from the topic of movies	Da Li: “Should I act for the benefit of personal happiness or should I act according to the external/objective value of a thing? They are often conflicting.” Guo Li: “Which basically boils down to “to play or to do homework?” Jia Lin : “Playing is fundamental to children. We think we are grown-ups; but we forget that we once and forever have a child living in our bodies.”	Individual preference—external/objective value Play—study Adults—children	Principle of behaviors (decision-making strategy) views of life (there is a child living in an adult’s body)
9	1 st session (I); conversations generated	Qi Li: “I struggle with Socrates’ concern: know yourself. I am not sure to what extend I know myself. Now,	Know yourself—	Principle of behaviors (decision-making strategy)

⁴² I was the first one to share my three favorite movies—The Butterfly Effect (2004); Never Let Me Go (2010). Even though we ended up with only having enough time to talk about my favorite films, we shared a lot about issues related to their lives while talking about those movies. For instance, after sharing the movie, Never Let Me Go, I asked, have you ever thought about the meaning of our lives?

Session & Content		Quotations/scenarios	Versus Codes	Types of Interactions
	from the topic of movies	it is like, I don't care! Everybody else is doing one thing. Therefore, I do it too."	follow the crowd	
10	1 st session (I); conversations generated from the topic of movies	<p>Da Li: "Do you have a childhood dream that you have kept ever since?"</p> <p>Angie: "Not really. It kept changing."</p> <p>Qi Li: "I have always wanted to be a teacher, until now."</p> <p>Xiao Si: "When I was in my elementary school, one of my classmates said he wanted to be a farmer."</p> <p>Angie: "my impression is that many kids from the countryside want to be a teacher, because they probably have not seen many other career options around them. I will say it is a social class related issue."</p> <p>Jia Lin: "Therefore, children learn little from what they have taught; they learn more from what they have experienced."</p>	<p>Childhood dreams—socio-economic background</p> <p>Learning—experiencing</p>	<p>Critical thinking (social class analysis)</p> <p>Views of life (philosophy: the importance of experiences)</p>
11	1 st session (I); conversations generated from the topic of movies	Jia Lin: "since the beginning of graduate school, I started to struggle between going to a big city, like Beijing, Shanghai, or Guangzhou, or staying in the Northeast, such as being a university counselor here at NENU. My family would love me to stay here—a stable job and close to them . But I love children's drama. The field is more developed in those big cities."	Personal interest—family's opinions	Principle of behaviors (decision-making strategy)
12	1 st session (I); conversations generated from the topic of movies	<p>Xiao Xin: "people's opinions affect me in a powerful way. I think hard about how to make my graduate school experiences more meaningful."</p> <p>Angie: what are some of the meaningful things that are happening right now?</p> <p>Xiao Xin: I am learning to do patchwork. Because I don't really</p>	A lack of talents—a less meaningful life	Views of life (what constitute a meaningful life? Meaningful for whom?)

Session & Content		Quotations/scenarios	Versus Codes	Types of Interactions
		<p>have any other talents, patchwork can be counted as a talent or a skill.</p> <p>Angie: Since you call it a skill. Would you say it is driven by an external drive (meaning, I need to learn something in order to...) or an internal drive (meaning, I am interested)?</p> <p>Xiao Xin: I would say more of an external drive.</p>	A personal interest—a socially recognized skill	
13	1st session (I); conversations generated from the topic of movies	<p>Angie: “What would you do in a perfect world?”</p> <p>Xiao Xin: “I have always wanted to play piano...But my friends and roommates responded to me—why learn piano? What can you do with it?”</p>	<p>Personal interest—other’s opinions (external value)</p> <p>Pragmatism—Utilitarianism</p>	Principle of behaviors
14	1st session (I); conversations generated from the topic of movies	<p>Angie: a while ago, a friend of mine asked me to share some of my favorite movies. The three movies I have shared today were in the list. I was shocked when I realized that I am into sci-fi and dystopian movies.</p>	<p>Reality—fiction</p> <p>Realism—imagination</p>	Views of life (self-discovery)
15	1st session (I); conversations generated from the topic of movies	<p>Da Lin: “Looking back my life trajectories, there is only a very small chance that we end up doing what we have really wanted to do. Our life is predominantly directed by external forces/factors, such as chance.”</p>	Chance—destiny	Views of life (philosophy of life)
16	1st session (I); conversations generated from the topic of movies	<p>Da Lin: “if the present is like a dot, and theoretically we could go any directions, what is the meaning of the past to the present, or the future?”</p> <p>Angie: “Therefore, we need to find our authentic voice, so that we don’t get dragged by unfiltered chances and phenomena. Your thinking is very relatable to my other movie--Butterfly Effect. There is no a perfect story. Chances are we will make mistakes and wrong choices, per se. But we are capable of reasoning, reflecting, and loving. That constitutes a meaningful life for me.”</p>	<p>Chance—individual will</p> <p>Unpredictability—predictability</p>	<p>Views of life (philosophy of life)</p> <p>Agency (a philosophical agency)</p>

Session & Content		Quotations/scenarios	Versus Codes	Types of Interactions
17	1st session (I); Game: One-Word-at-a-Time Mantra	Guo Li: “So, the first person is important.” Angie: “Not exactly. Everybody is important—each person in the team has the potential to shift the trajectory of the whole sentence.”	Individual—collective	Positionality (Individual and collective)
18	1st session (I); Game: One-Word-at-a-Time Mantra	Xiao Xin: “I tried to guess what he or she would say and worried about what I have to say.... I would feel so awkward if I failed by not being able to offer a word to continue the sentence.”	mistakes--awkwardness	Principle of behaviors
19	1st session (I); Game: One-Word-at-a-Time Mantra	One of the rules of the game: Cheering for mistakes /celebrate vulnerability. Qi Li (on-site journal): “I wish people would accept and celebrate mistakes in real life too.”	mistakes—supportive attitude	Principle of behaviors
20	1st session (I); Game: One-Word-at-a-Time Mantra	Guo Li (on-site journal): “I am kind of humorous. I always want to surprise people and want to be different from others.”	Individual identity—be different	Identity (Individual public image)
21	1st session (I); Game: One-Word-at-a-Time Mantra	Angie: “when you want to be creative and try really hard to be different, you might lose the opportunity to be in the moment.”	Be creative—be present	Positionality (Individual and collective)
22	1st session (I); Game: One-Word-at-a-Time Mantra (on-site journal)	Da Lin: “Improvisation is not absolutely improvised. It has a lot to do with our past experiences.”	Improvisation—past experiences	Views of life
23	1st session (I); Game: One-Word-at-a-Time Mantra	Even in the game, Da Lin does not want to say things he does not mean ⁴³ . (see image x)	Game—real life	Principle of behaviors (public image management); Principle of behaviors (self-censor)
24	1st session (I); Game: One-Word-at-a-Time Mantra	Jia Lin: “I noticed everybody's expressions and their joyfulness when we successfully composed a satisfactory sentence. It is a sign of mutual recognition”	Individual—collective	positionality (View of a leader)

⁴³ The group constructed a sentence: Wo Zai Zhe-Li Fei-Chang Bu... (我在这里非常不...). It means, *Being here, I am really not...* It was Da Lin's turn to continue the sentence. Da Lin paused for a few seconds. Everybody started to laugh. We all knew that Da Lin felt reluctant to add the word *Happy* to the sentence. Da Lin looked down and smiled with some shyness.

Angie: *You are overthinking now. It is not like we have to say the "correct" things.*

Da Lin: *I would connect the sentence to my real situation.*

Session & Content		Quotations/scenarios	Versus Codes	Types of Interactions
	(onsite journal)			
25	1 st session (I); Game: One-Word-at-a-Time Mantra	Da Li: “At first, I thought somebody in the group would be leading the direction of the sentence. But later on, I realized that at least I was not. I kept using conjunctions, like ‘is’ or ‘should.’”	Lead—not lead	Identity (Self-examination); positionality (Individual and collective)
26	1 st session (I); Game: One-Word-at-a-Time Mantra	Qi Li: “I am thinking about how to make it easier for the person behind me to continue the sentence” Qi Li (on-site journal): “overly considering others will constrain one’s own thoughts.”	Self—others	Views of life (Altruism and self-development)
27	1 st session (II); group free-flow conversations	Guo Li: “I think it depends on whether we have a female or male mentor. Dare you discuss the meaning of your life with our mentor?” Da Li: “My hunch is that he will not engage in those kinds of conversation with us.” Guo Li: “Exactly! One day, in a joking manner, he asked me, ‘have you dyed your hair?’ I was really stunned. Were he talking to me in a more serious manner, I would have immediately dyed my hair to black. Even with his joking manner, I seriously thought of getting my hair color back for quite a few days.	Female mentor—male mentor Respect—fearful	Gender stereotype Interpersonal relationship (Mentor-mentee)
28	1 st session (II); group free-flow conversations	Guo Li: “Actually, people in other Shi-Mens know much more on things in our Shi-Men, such as direct admission nominees. We are expected to open up to each other mutually. If I tell you something; and you tell me nothing, that is not right.”	Authentic/open—oblique Transparency— trustworthy	Interpersonal relationship (within a Shi-Men)
29	1 st session (II); group free-flow conversations	Guo Li: “we often have a group of students holding many books and walking with him to his primary school for class. Some see that as a flattering scene. Besides, he has administrative positions. people simply hold preconceptions, such as being a bureaucrat , about a higher position administrator, then they look for evidences.” Da Lin: “A student in our class once told me that (s)he thinks our mentor	Others’ opinions to our mentor—our opinions on other mentors	Gender stereotype Interpersonal relationship (Mentor-mentee)

Session & Content		Quotations/scenarios	Versus Codes	Types of Interactions
		<p>has a superior attitude, because his text message is always short and direct, without much explanation.”</p> <p>Angie: I know a male mentor X. He really does not want a girl to pursue a Ph.D., because he thinks girls should get married first, then consider a Ph.D.</p> <p>Guo Li: I am not sure whether he really thinks girls should consider marriage first; or he actually thinks girls are not suitable in academia. Our marriage statistics have nothing to do with him!</p> <p>Da Lin: it is hard to find male mentees in our field. Too much drama among girls.</p>	<p>Marriage first—PhD first</p> <p>Female mentee—male mentee</p>	
30	1st session (II); group free-flow conversations	<p>Da Li: “I can’t even remember some of our cohort’s names.”</p> <p>Guo Li: “Relatively, we have closer relationship with people within a Shi-Men.”</p> <p>Da Li: “Not all the Shi-Mens though. I heard that within some of the Shi-Mens, the relationship is not that harmonious.”</p>	<p>Closeness—distance</p> <p>Shi-Men—classmates</p>	Interpersonal relationship
31	1st session (II); group free-flow conversations	<p>Angie: “We are really close, because we all are in one Shi-Men.”</p> <p>Guo Li & Da Li: “not only that; there is also hierarchy among students of different academic levels/years.”</p>	Closeness—hierarchy	Interpersonal relationship (Within a Shi-Men)
32	1st session (II); group free-flow conversations	<p>Guo Li: “Some professors simply cannot lower their status—the kind of attitude is like, “say something, you guys.” It felt like the teacher is in an oppositional position. Nobody wants to share in that kind of circumstances. Some teachers are more friendly and are closer to the students. In return, students respond to those teachers more casually too.”</p>	<p>Higher status—lower status</p> <p>Teacher—student</p>	Interpersonal relationship (teachers and students)
33	1st session (II); group free-flow conversations	<p>Angie: “Go back to our situation here: Since we have been feeling sick of these kinds of students’ presentations, what can we do to change the situation? What about collectively write an email to a professor”?</p>	<p>Action—no action</p> <p>Collective action—rebellion</p>	Principle of behaviors (legitimacy of action)

Session & Content		Quotations/scenarios	Versus Codes	Types of Interactions
		Guo Li: But if we collect students' signatures, won't the professor wonder—What do you want? Rebellion? Da Lin: You don't see that happen often for sure.	Common practice — unusual practice	
34	1st session (II); group free-flow conversations	Da Li: ...I was in a good class... Guo Li: I had my first boyfriend when I was in my middle school. I was the top student in our class; and he was on the bottom. Back then, if I had my current criteria for a boyfriend, I would never have chosen him; instead, I need a person who is on my level. But when I was young, he was so handsome in my eyes. At that time, my teachers wondered, why a good student like me would fall for a bad student...Actually, I remember, whenever his behaviors affected my mood, which in turn would affect my academic performance, I would suggest splitting up. After a few days, he would call me; then we back together again. I felt like I could not really push him away. Then, I thought, if we really split up, I would end up in a really bad mood, which would affect me negatively. Therefore, our relationship continued until the first year of our high school."	Good class — bad class Good student — bad student A teen's criteria for a boyfriend — a graduate student's criteria Academic performance — relationship with boyfriend	Identity Views of life (Competition)
35	1st session (II); group free-flow conversations	Guo Li: Now, I am still attracted to bad boys. But I understand that they cannot be my boyfriends... I have a stronger sense of stableness with my current boyfriend—who is a gentle man. My past experience will affect how I educate my child in the future. I will tell my child that you will have many choices in the years ahead of you, don't feel devastated if you lose the one in front of you.	Learned to be decisive — more choices ahead of you Reflection — action	Views of life; Interpersonal relationship (boyfriend and girlfriend)
36	1st session (II); group free-flow conversations	Ah Yang: maybe you are lacking a bad girl spice in your personality; then, when you spot that in a boy, you are attracted to it. Guo Li: My educational and my family environment do not allow me	Perform like a good kid for others	Principle of behaviors

Session & Content		Quotations/scenarios	Versus Codes	Types of Interactions
		<p>and a girl are in a flirty stage, you will not confess your love to her first?</p> <p>Da Lin: you are right.</p> <p>Girls (they were surprised): Really?</p> <p>You still are this way?</p> <p>Da Lin: Yes. Yes.</p> <p>Angie: You wait for girl to confess her love to you first?</p> <p>Da Li: No wonder you are so confident. Always girls chase you around.</p>	(female perspective)	
40	1st session (II); group free-flow conversations	<p>Guo Li: how many girlfriends have you had in total?</p> <p>Da Li: 5, so far.</p> <p>Guo Li: how did those relationships end?</p> <p>Da Lin: primarily because of me. I am kind of boring. They would feel that life was too flat with me.</p> <p>Guo Li: Can you change? Or are you willing to change?</p> <p>Da Lin: I want to. But I cannot.</p> <p>Guo Li: Because you don't want to try harder for her.</p>	<p>Low self-esteem (male perspective)—did not love enough (female perspective)</p> <p>Be yourself—change for your romantic partner</p>	Views of life (Romantic relationship)
41	1st session (II); group free-flow conversations	<p>Da Lin: You guys have to know that I am not a two-timer, because in each relationship, I was always serious... I used to long for loving relationships. I used to think that I should take responsibilities in a relationship. But then after I was hurt by this girl in college, I started to think that I don't have to take relationships too seriously. I should be more relaxed. So, I stop chasing girls. And I don't reject a girl's affection in general. Very often, I am interested in girls at the very beginning. Slowly, I lose interest.</p>	<p>Faithful—two-timer</p> <p>Serious—not serious</p>	Views of life (Romantic relationship)

Table D2

Initial Coding of Group Activities (Second and Third Sessions)

Session & Content		Quotations/scenarios	Versus Codes	Types of Interactions
1	2nd session; Game: up-side-down storysharing	Qi Li: “Recently, we went to observe some elementary school teachers’ classroom teaching activities; and came back with all the critiques. Our mentor said we were too harsh. We tend to pay attention to others’ shortcomings and criticize others; we should learn from others too, also learn to praise others.”	Critique—compliment/ constructive critique Assessment—critique	views of life (look for values or weaknesses in others)
2	2nd session; Game: Zip, Zap, Boing, and Freak out	David (on-site journal): “Zap changes directions, which is like a creative and constructive person in a group. Boing bounces back, which is like a critical person in a group, who is more destructive than constructive. More Boing-like persons in a group could destabilize the group. On one hand, Zip could be a supporter in a group; on the other hand, Zip could also represent the banality of evil—blindly follow with no self-reflection.”	Game—real life	views of life (a third-person’s view)
3	2nd session; Game: Zip, Zap, Boing, and Freak out	Guo Li (on-site journal): “In a group, I want to be noticed and to be seen as irreplaceable.”	Irreplaceable—be noticed	Positionality
4	2nd session; Game: Zip, Zap, Boing, and Freak out	Qi Li (on-site journal): “It could be the familiarity with the game my body seems to react to the game independently, without my conscious thinking. I feel more relaxed this time” Xiao Xin: “Comparing to the previous two sessions, today, I feel more relaxed.”	familiarity—relaxation body—mind	Connection (body and mind)
5	2nd session; Game: Zip, Zap, Boing, and Freak out	Da Li (on-site journal): “I realized that I tend to use Zip. In life, I play the role of a follower a lot too... I want to try the role of a leader...It is crucial to experience different roles in life.”	Leader—follower	Positionality; Principle of behaviors (wishes)

Session & Content		Quotations/scenarios	Versus Codes	Types of Interactions
6	2nd session; Game: Zip, Zap, Boing, and Freak out	Xin Yu (on-site journal): “I was highly focused and present. I prefer to say Zip. Since I am not feeling quite familiar with the environment yet, I cannot be entirely relaxed—I don’t want to make mistakes. Zap and Boing only make sense when surrounded by Zip(s)—red flowers embellish; while green leaves accompany.”	Leader— follower familiarity— relaxation	Positionality; Principle of behaviors; Views of life (dialectical thinking)
7	2nd session; Game: Columbian hypnosis	Xin Yu (Prefer to be a follower): “In real life, I think I prefer being led. I am the kind of person, if you assign me some works, I will try my best to get it done beautifully. But I don’t think of leading others. If I had to, I could still do it. But I am more compliant. Responsibilities to others could bring disappointments and stress. Being at a position of a teacher, I cannot escape responsibilities; It is much easier to be a student.”	Responsibilities — disappointment/ stress; compliant— easier	Positionality Views of life
8	2nd session; Game: Columbian hypnosis	Qi Li (Prefer to be a follower): “A leader would feel a higher level of stress. If I were a leader, I don’t know how to form a cohesive atmosphere for the group...I had tried really hard to be a leader before; but I could not play the role of a leader very well.”	Leadership position—stress; Leadership skills—form special atmosphere	Views of life; Positionality; Principle of behaviors
9	2nd session; Game: Columbian hypnosis	Xiao Xin (Prefer to be a follower): “As a leader, I find it difficult to meet my own standards or others’ expectations. As a follower, with relatively lower expectations from self and others, I can dutifully finish my job; and I help others if I have extra time and energy, which gives me a great sense of accomplishment.” (Qi Li echoes Xiao Xin’s statement on the benefit of being a follower)	Low expectations (a follower)—high expectations (a leader); High expectations— disappointment; Helping others—a sense of accomplishment	Positionality; Views of life; Principle of behaviors
10	2nd session; Game: Columbian hypnosis	Da Lin (used to prefer to be a leader): “everybody has the desire for power and a leadership position. It is in our nature as human beings. But, because of some constrains in reality, we are forced to be in a	Leader—power; Power—innate desire; Bad experiences—	Positionality; Views of life; Principle of behaviors

Session & Content		Quotations/scenarios	Versus Codes	Types of Interactions
		compliant position.” (Da Lin used to love being a leader. when he was an undergraduate, one incidence of being a failed/disappointed leader changed his attitude.)	change of attitude	
11	2 nd session; Game: Columbian hypnosis	Guo Li (Prefer to be a leader): “I think I have something to offer to the group.”	Leader—something to offer	Positionality; Views of life;
12	2 nd session; Game: Columbian hypnosis	Xiao Si (Either a leader, or a follower): “If I were a leader, I will be a considerate one; but lacking in authority maybe.” “As a follower, I sometimes want to repel, but more often comply, for the sake of the group interest”	Being considerate—lack of authority; Repel—comply	Positionality; Principle of behaviors (dialectical thinking)
13	2 nd session; Game: Columbian hypnosis	David: “If playing with friends, I am happy to be a leader. In a working scenario, I normally don’t want to participate—meaning neither a leader nor a follower ... When writing academic article, I prefer ‘looking for help’ to ‘cooperation’.”	Leader—follower; Cooperation—inefficient; Cooperation—looking for help	Positionality; Principle of behaviors; Interpersonal relationship (with fellow scholars)
14	2 nd session; Game: Columbian hypnosis	Da Li: “ I wish I can have an opportunity to be a leader ”	Leadership experience—a wish	Agency (a wished-for agency)
15	2 nd session; Game: Columbian hypnosis	Angie: “What are the responsibilities of a follower (a student in a classroom setting)? Should a follower act and think like a leader too? What are the possible downsides of being a follower in its purist sense?”	Follower—responsibilities	Positionality; Agency (a veiled agency—a follower’s role)
16	2 nd session; Game: Columbian hypnosis	Da Li: “due to the formation (more lectures) and/or the size of the classrooms, in China, generally speaking, students are lacking in a sense of participation or responsibility... To use myself as an example, I tend to have a lot of self-doubt and hesitations. I often don’t feel confident enough to share my answers/thoughts. But then, after the teacher has announced ‘the correct answer’, I would regret for not believing in myself.”	Teacher—Student Authority—silence Scientific knowledge—personal/experiential knowledge --	Agency (an intimidated agency) Critical thinking (Power analysis; whose knowledge is more valuable?)

Session & Content		Quotations/scenarios	Versus Codes	Types of Interactions
		<p>Angie: “The teacher’s words equal authority.”</p> <p>Da Li: “Pretty much so.”</p> <p>Angie: “We have to value our own voices first. Then, our voices will grow and continue to inspire others. Besides, there are multiple dimensions of value, such as the scientific dimension and the personal/experiential dimension.”</p>		
17	2nd session; Game: Colombian hypnosis	Ah Yang: “depends on a teacher’s confidence level—a teacher has to be confident enough to be challenged by students. However, in China, very often students are afraid of “public shaming” a teacher by raising a challenging question; or “public shaming” themselves by answering a question wrongly.”	Raise challenging questions or give wrong answers—public shaming (stigma)	Principle of behaviors;
18	2nd session; Game: Trust Falls	<p>Xin Yu: “The same game in my field is called ‘A weed in the wind’—the person in the middle resembles a weed; the wind blows the weed, the weed falls. But with reliable support around, the weed is not isolated but protected.”</p> <p>Angie: When I learned about the game for the first time, I was led to imagine the one in the middle as a leader or initiator. Even though the supports are there for the leader, the leader should never take the support for granted.</p>	Looking for protection—looking for support;	Positionality (different perspectives on supports)
19	2nd session; Game: I am poem	Angie: “When we were repeating who we are the second round, my heart was touched by this power of ritual performance. We all are unique beings, which is absolutely legit in itself—we don’t have to prove to anyone the value of our existence.”	Innate value—granted (external) value	Views of life; Body and mind Connection (Power of ritual performance)
20	2nd session; Game: I am poem	Ah Yang: “When I repeated ‘I am a person who practices Kong Fu’, I was touched in a powerful way by my own statement. When do we have the opportunity to seriously speak out loud of our wishes and our hopes? We sit here; and listen to each other’s stories. I feel so real.	face-to-face communications—virtual communicate (through technology)	Body and mind Connection (The power of expressing self and listening to others)

Session & Content		Quotations/scenarios	Versus Codes	Types of Interactions
		Nowadays, with cell phones and technology, we have less and less face-to-face communications. Our sister offers a precious platform for us to express and to learn to express.”		
21	3rd session; Checking-in: What’s in your mind lately?	Jia Lin : “I had our last breakfast with a roommate of mine who just graduated. She will leave campus and take a train home this afternoon. Another roommate of mine and I once planned to watch a movie together, but we had to take many rain checks. We did not end up watching the movie. She is graduated too; and has left. As we are getting older and older, we are facing more departures. Sometimes we say, ‘another time.’ It often becomes ‘never.’”	Farewell moment—seize the moment	Interpersonal relationship (roommates); Views of life (seize the moment)
22	3rd session; Checking-in	Da Li: “I found myself not to take initiatives in connecting with old friends or family members. I am afraid friends might think I am too aloof. Is it due to my personality?”	Aloof—enthusiastic	Interpersonal relationship (friendship); Views of life (self-evaluation)
23	3rd session; Checking-in	Qi Li: Do you want to share first? Otherwise, I can do it. David: You go. I don’t really have stories.	See stories in life—do not see stories in life	Views of life (philosophy of life)
24	3rd session; Checking-in	Researcher’s summary: Qi Li shared a story about the sweetness of her roommate and another story about the poor older lady who digs rubbish bins outside of her dormitory building. She felt so sad for the older lady and cried. I started to cry too when I saw Qi Li crying. Guo Ning was already crying before the story. Then, the group laughed together. (see picture below) Qi Li: “I wish I could do something for poor people like that old lady. But seemingly I don’t have enough power.”	Social conscience—lacking agency	Interpersonal relationship; Critical thinking (social awareness) Agency (a powerless agency)
25	3rd session; Checking-in	Angie: “I used to feel powerless all the time. but now, I believe in the power of real collectivism. We hold each other’s hands and struggle	power—collectivism	Positionality; Agency (a collective agency)

Session & Content		Quotations/scenarios	Versus Codes	Types of Interactions
		together. We are not facing the world as one person anymore. We are a powerful group.”	agency—collectivism	
26	3 rd session; Checking-in	<p>Angie: “How to say the word agency in Chinese in our context?”</p> <p>Qi Li: institute?</p> <p>Da Li: let me check the dictionary... ‘act on behalf of someone’</p> <p>Angie: No. At this moment, the only Chinese term I can think of that is close to the meaning of Agency in our context is “individual’s conscious initiative”—a Marxist concept. To me, we need agency if we want to keep our decency as human beings.</p>	Agency—human decency	Agency (what is agency)
27	3 rd session; Checking-in	<p>Researcher’s summary: The group discusses how Qi Li communicates with strangers on the street. They worry about her safety. I felt appropriate to share with the group an old dream of mine about a sense of powerlessness, a feeling of distrust among people, a feeling of alienation, and a state of meaninglessness.</p> <p>Qi Li: “The first scene in your dream reminds me of a topic in one of our classes—we talked about how leaders persuade people using public speaking skills.”</p> <p>Angie: “A leader needs skills and charisma. But audiences should always grasp the skill of critical thinking if they don’t want to be manipulated.”</p>	A convincing leader—a critical follower	<p>Positionality</p> <p>Interpersonal relationship (with strangers)</p> <p>Agency (agencies in different positions)</p>
28	3 rd session; Checking-in	<p>Researcher’s summary: Guo Li’s multilayered stories (in her undergraduate years): friendship or drama among girls (jealousy + loyalty + betrayal + backstabbing + trust), depression, an atmosphere of competition (in the classroom and dormitory), disapproval by teachers, feeling lost, against kowtowing or asking for credits, seeing the dark side of the world, a sense of unfairness, painful memories (in the</p>	<p>An emotional being—a social being;</p> <p>Misinterpretation—pain;</p> <p>Insecure personality—mask-wearing (as a disguise)</p>	<p>Interpersonal relationship;</p> <p>Views of life;</p> <p>Principle of behaviors (kowtow; mask-wearing)</p>

Session & Content		Quotations/scenarios	Versus Codes	Types of Interactions
		end, learned to kowtow for the sake of approval)		
29	3 rd session; Checking-in	David: Yesterday, a friend in my social network posted a selfie and noted: among girls, we don't need to fight—I won by being the prettiest! (the group laughed) Angie: This girl on your social network downplayed our girls' ability to resolve conflicts! David & Guo Li: Most likely, this girl lost a fight to another girl. Guo Li: When it was the time to compete for Direct Admission opportunity, it was simply chaotic in our class. Some of them obviously started to backstab each other. I was really upset. My dad responded, “you girls are really fussy! If it were a group of boys, it would have only taken them a face-to-face argument or a fight to resolve the problem....”	Female — backstabbing Male — face-to-face argument	Views of life (Gender stereotype)
30	3 rd session; Checking-in	Guo Li: “But today, I feel sad because for the past few days I did not feel like study and I did not want to do anything. But only studying gives me a sense of security and accomplishment. Because I don't have any other talents. Growing up, the only two things I have been doing are studying and play. If I don't study, I don't have a life.”	Study — play; A student's life — Study Study — no other talents	Principle of behaviors (Time management); Views of life (talents)
31	3 rd session; Checking-in	Guo Li: people say, we should learn how to “kill time.” I haven't learned. Qi Li: I know how to kill time. David: I have been wasting my life for over 20 years!	Cherish time — waste time	Principle of behaviors (Time management); Views of life (time)
32	3 rd session; Checking-in	David: ... I think knowledge from hundreds of years ago is basically useless. Not long ago, I went to Ji Lin University to attend a philosophy class. They really criticize Descartes. And Descartes' Discourse on the Method, of which we speak highly. Many teachers in	The field of Education — an outdated, unqualified, uncritical, and unoriginal field;	Views of life (the field of education);

Session & Content		Quotations/scenarios	Versus Codes	Types of Interactions
		<p>Ji Lin University regard this book as not relevant anymore.</p> <p>Da Li: Qi Li is reading it now.</p> <p>David: Also, towards Kant and Hegel, they all take a critical perspective; while in the field of education, we all use Hegel for window dressing. It surely works! I have tried. Say, among 30 bibliographies, if you have 15 Marx's works, together with many classic works in the history, you are one step closer to those topnotch journals.</p>	Rule of the academic game — window-dressing	
33	3rd session; Checking-in	<p>Angie: worshipping authorities, especially Western authorities. The field of education still has a lot of space to grow. Therefore, David, why not taking the responsibility and be part of the effort to develop the field?</p> <p>Guo Li: Next time, I will quote David.</p>	Problems— opportunity to make changes (responsibility)	Agency (a critical agency: be the change)
34	3rd session; Checking-in	<p>Da Lin: The feeling of departure gets me more and more recently. I had a dream last night: I was in my dorm. A roommate of mine came back from his defense. I asked, “when will you leave?” He said, “tomorrow.” I was shocked emotionally, and said, “it is so sudden. We haven't had our final meal together yet.” Then I woke up; and felt sad.</p> <p>David: Let's have dinner together tonight. (the group laugh)</p> <p>Da Lin: I have two studying buddies for quite a while. Before them, I used to study alone.</p> <p>Guo Li: Do you prefer to be alone or to have friends with you when you study?</p> <p>Da Lin: With friends.</p> <p>Guo Li: Do you miss the feeling of being alone?</p> <p>Da Lin: You tend to overthink if you are alone for too long.</p> <p>Jia Lin: It is good to have friends around.</p>	Dwell in the past—move on to a new chapter (Gender perspectives)	Views of life (friendship; gender perspectives)

Session & Content		Quotations/scenarios	Versus Codes	Types of Interactions
		<p>Guo Li: Will you feel bad when you and your friends have to separate?</p> <p>Da Lin: No.</p> <p>Angie: Because he can find new friends in his new environment.</p> <p>David: Exactly.</p> <p>(Da Lin nodded. Girls gave no respond to it.)</p>		

Table D3

Dramaturgical Coding of Case Study Topic 1 (Part 1, Fourth Session)

Case Study 1: Small Group Discussion and Student Presentation	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
<i>Prompt question: How does X start?</i>		
Angie: How did “small group discussion and student presentation” in the classroom start?	Question: How did it start? (1) Learn from the West (a Western way) (2) Part of teachers’ class design or expectations.	<i>Critical thinking: (1) a historical perspective; (2) a dialectical relationship between a negative reaction and a proactive action</i>
Qi Li: Learn from the American way.		
Angie: Meaning a more individual focused, democratic, and dynamic classroom atmosphere.		
Da Li: The first class of the semester, some teachers would say, “You are graduate students now. You should have your own opinions and perspectives.”		
Angie: How would you feel after hearing that kind of statement? Feel excited? Eager to express yourself?	Follow up question: How do you react to the teacher’s expectations? Attitude (1): Not excited. Attitude (2): Stressed. Attitude (3): Not excited; and no expectations (due to a stereotype in mind).	<i>Critical thinking: self-reflection or self-awareness</i>
Guo Li: Nope		
Xiao Xin: A bit stressed.		
Da Li: I would know that it would be a heavy-load class—many presentations. I wouldn’t feel excited, because I could foresee the atmosphere of the whole semester.		
Angie: It would become formalistic?		
Da Li: You would have a certain stereotype of the kind of class formation. So, no expectations.		
Angie: If you were a teacher, do you have better ways to arrange a class? Or would you try to make this formation work?	Question: If you were a teacher, what will you do? Attitude: lazy teachers ask student to present	<i>Positionality</i>
David: I think it is a lazy and easy way for teachers. They don’t have to prepare for the class. They can have their teaching loads fulfilled easily in this way.		
Angie: Okay, say, we might have lazy teachers on one side. On the other side, students don’t have many valuable things to offer. Is that our assumption?	Conflicts: lazy teachers & lousy students’ presentations ⁴⁴ . Tactics (Preconditions of a successful small-group-discussion class): (1) serious	<i>Problem-posing & action-seeking</i>
Guo Li: First of all, we have to know whether a teacher takes the class		

⁴⁴ The group mentioned “lousy students’ presentations” in the end of our first Playbuilding session.

Case Study 1: Small Group Discussion and Student Presentation	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
seriously or not; and whether a teacher assigns some valuable topics to each group or not. On top of that, if we have serious students who take the topics seriously as well, we might end up with a great outcome.	attitude from both sides; and (2) valuable topics.	
Angie: Will one serious group inspire the rest of the groups to be more serious?	Follow up question: How to inspire each other to be serious?	<i>Problem-posing & action-seeking</i> <i>Critical thinking:</i> A dialectical relationship between knowledge & lived experiences
Guo Li: If one serious group offers a well-prepared presentation, the group has to take the audience’s interest into consideration.	Tactics 1 (Preconditions of a successful class): Thoughtful presenters and well-prepared presentations.	
Angie: In other words, sometimes it is not the audience’s fault for not paying attention to a group presentation.	Belief: Sincerity could be felt between presenters and the audience	
Guo Li: Students can tell whether a presentation is sincere or not.		
Qi Li: I think, it is important that we all read the reading materials prior to the presentations. We have to have the information in our brain, in order to resonate with a presenter’s words, no matter what the topic is, and no matter if the presenter is interesting or not.	Tactics 2 (Preconditions of a successful class): Student responsibility and teacher competency	
Da Li: Right, you have to know the material in order to judge the quality of the presentation. However, very often, in our classroom, only the presenters know the material.	Conflicts: Audiences are often not prepared.	
Angie: On top of that, students’ presenting skills and teacher’s spontaneous feedbacks are important too.	Tactics 3 (Preconditions of a successful class): Improve students’ presentation skills with the teacher’s help & a teacher with a huge repository of knowledge to be able to offer feedbacks.	
Da Lin: We might need some directions or instructions in the process of preparing for a presentation. For instance, our teacher asks each group to send to him their presentation PowerPoint for him to review prior to the presentation. He would recommend some books or articles as references.	Conflicts: Students are not experienced scholars nor presenters; audiences have no questions in mind.	
David: Our teacher always gives a long lecture after each student’s presentation. Maybe many teachers could not do what our teacher does. You need a huge repository of knowledge to be able to do that. Besides, students usually could not	Tactics 4 (Preconditions of a successful class): A group of people on a similar academic level, with shared goals and standards.	

Case Study 1: Small Group Discussion and Student Presentation	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
<p>find the key points and with limited presenting skills. Very often, the audience did not attend the class with questions either.</p> <p>An opposite example: I have a group—we have all published a few articles in some many journals. We get together periodically to talk about writing and publishing tricks. We are all committed, because we share the same goal and have our shared standard—we offer what we consider to be valuable and referable to each other.</p>		
<p>Angie: So, we share what we are good at, at least things we have experienced, in order to guarantee the quality of the shared information. I have some similar experiences in the US—students not only share knowledge, but also combine the knowledge with their own working or lived experiences, which made them the experts of their own lives. If the information is valuable to the presenter, it should be inspirational for the audience as well. Our takeaway from this story will be—We should be encouraged to connect the knowledge to what we care about in our daily life.</p>	<p>Question: How to guarantee the quality of the shared information.</p> <p>Tactics: Connect knowledge to our lived experiences.</p> <p>Belief: (1) through connecting knowledge with our lived experiences, we become the experts of our lives. (2) If the information is valuable to the presenter, it should be inspirational for the audience.</p>	
<p>Qi Li: Professor Y used to ask us: “What do you care about? List them in your notebook. We will talk about them in the class.” No response from students, usually.</p>	<p>A real-life problem (based upon the previous action plan): A teacher’s “short-lived enthusiasms.”</p>	<i>Problem-posing</i>
<p>Guo Li & Da Li: We did send to him our interested topics. But there was no follow-up.</p>		
<p>Guo Li: I think it was just one of his short-lived enthusiasms.</p>		
<p>Xiao Si: I have one example. It was my first year in my graduate program. I had one class, in which the teacher made it almost all about discussion. Sometimes, the teacher would be disappeared and came back just before the class was over. At first, the students thought it was fun; then it became boring. When it comes to presentations or group discussions, we all figured out who</p>	<p>Another real-life conflict: a failed discussion-based classroom.</p> <p>Conflict (1): Lazy students & an irresponsible teacher—the class became a few students’ self-talks.</p> <p>Conflict (2): A discouraging teacher often discourages</p>	

Case Study 1: Small Group Discussion and Student Presentation	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
loves to present, to write, or to read. Then, the rest of the group would always recommend that person to present. We all sort of have this dependent personality—if we are not prepared for the class, we think he or she should be prepared, because he/she is always prepared. Therefore, the rest of us don't have to do anything.	students from making further inquiries.	
Angie: Right. This is one of the disadvantages of the class formation.		
Xiao Si: On some other occasions, one student might be really interested in one topic and ask the teacher questions. If the teacher did not continue the conversation in a meaningful way, the student might never be bothered to ask again.		
Angie: Right. Now, the situation is whether we want to give up this kind of class formation or to improve it, we have to take actions ⁴⁵ .	Call out action: What do we do about it?	<i>Action; practice; agency</i>
<i>Prompt questions: What makes X continue? & What gets people to do something about X?</i>		
Angie: Have we ever thought about making changes?	One collective action attempt; Problem: students concerned about the quality of the class. Tactics: they had one student representative raised up the concern to the teacher. Conflicts: The student representative was not brave enough to grab the teacher's attention. The action attempt was failed.	<i>Story 1: One failed collective action plan.</i>
Qi Li: Yes, I have.		
Da Li: This semester, in one of our classes, when we were having group discussions, we talked about the fact that the quality of our class is getting worse and worse. We decided to let the teacher know in the next class.		
(a few of them are talking together): The person who was supposed to raise up the issue was too timid to speak up out loud. And the teacher did not pay attention either. So that was it.		
Da Li: The teacher did not get our message. The issue was left unsettled.		
Guo Li: I don't think the professor would listen or change. He has been teaching in this way for many years. How can we expect him to make changes?	From a teacher's perspective, conflicts: (1) it must be hard for a senior teacher to change his teaching style.	<i>Positionality (a teacher's perspective)</i>
Angie: So, you tried.		

⁴⁵ We then move to the next question in our prompt. **However, we had covered** some of the questions in the prompt when we were dealing with the first prompt question.

Case Study 1: Small Group Discussion and Student Presentation	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
<p>David: For a relatively new teacher, a typical one-and-a-half-hour class means three hours of preparation. If you are a first-year teacher, it will take you even longer to prepare.</p> <p>Angie: Meaning teachers often do not have enough time to be well prepared.</p> <p>David: Teaching is really tiring. You have to keep talking for one and a half hours.</p> <p>Da Li: Is it because teaching is not important for him (the teacher)?</p> <p>Angie: I guess teaching is not an essential part of faculty evaluation. This could be one of the reasons for this phenomenon to continue. Have you had other kinds of attempts? For change?</p>	<p>(2) for a new teacher, it takes a lot of time to prepare a good full lecturing class.</p> <p>(3) maybe teaching is not an essential part of faculty evaluation. Therefore, a teacher does not have to care.</p>	
<p>Da Lin: I think many students are simply used to it. Without reflections, some might find it acceptable, because you don't have to take much of the responsibilities, kind of a form of relaxing.</p> <p>Angie: Are we the only people who care about the meaning of our graduate schooling experiences? Those who don't care about classes, do not care about meaning either? Or is it that their meaning system is not constructed in the classroom?</p> <p>David & Da Lin: I think their meaning systems have nothing to do with what is going on in the classrooms.</p> <p>David: This is why I don't go to classes. For most of my master's level classes, I only attended a few times for each class--the first class, the class I had to present, and the last class. On the doctoral level, teachers usually lecture. For instance, if a doctoral student was asked to present on the repeatability of knowledge, he/she might not want to take the time and effort to dig into the topic. Or, if you want a doctoral student to tease out Rousseau's educational thoughts, he/she might find it meaningless. A doctoral student would for sure prefer spending the time to</p>	<p>From a student's perspective, conflicts: some might find it easy to simply accept the "reality" and not to think or enact changes.</p> <p>A follow-up question: Is one's meaning of graduate schooling experiences has something to do with one's classroom experiences?</p> <p>Belief: (1) The formation of classroom presentations is not always the best choice.</p> <p>(2) New ideas are not for sharing; but reserved for one's own publications.</p> <p>Story-sharing: (1) David skipped most of his master level classes. His doctoral classes are lecture-based.</p> <p>Subtext: David prefers lecture-based classes.</p> <p>(2) Many doctoral students do not want to spend time on some meaningless topics or those topics that are not directly related to their research topics.</p> <p>Subtext: pragmatic students</p>	<p><i>Positionality (a student's perspective)</i></p> <p><i>Critical thinking: What knowledge is valued the most?</i></p>

Case Study 1: Small Group Discussion and Student Presentation	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
publish an article in a topnotch journal. If a doctoral student came up with a new idea, he/she might be afraid to share with other doctoral students, because others might take the idea and publish an article based upon the very idea.	(3) It makes better sense for doctoral students to spend time on publications. Subtext: pragmatic students	
Angie: I found it rather strange—if I have an idea, which is based upon my life experiences and my knowledge base, how could others steal it?	A follow-up question: How could one's ideas be stolen? Belief: publication as a goal; ideas-sharing as a mean.	<i>Critical thinking: A dialectical relationship between Mean and Goal</i>
David: Some students write really fast. Two nights would be enough for them to finish the draft of an article.		
Angie: Okay, we are saying, comparing to those “utilitarian” goals, such as publications, taking classes seems rather insignificant in students’ lives. Therefore, we let those precious learning opportunities in the classroom become wasted.	A follow-up question: Should we give up classroom learning as a learning opportunity? Tactics: “Skip classes”; “But I take our mentor’s class.” Belief: “We think taking classes is a waste of our time” (David, Qi Li & Guo Li).	<i>Critical thinking: negative freedom or positive freedom (Fromm, 2001)</i>
David: Yes. We think taking classes is wasting our time. So, we skip classes. But I take our mentor’s class.		
Angie: But our mentor only has one brain. How many more brains do we have in a classroom?		
David: Normally, we have less than 20 students in our doctoral classes.		
Angie: Class size matters too. Again, what does it take for us to take action and to make changes? Can you really not go to your classes?		
Da Li: I skip classes a lot.		
Guo Li: The only class I took from the very beginning to the end was our mentor’s class.		
Angie: Okay, let me ask this way: do you think it is worth it to try to make changes in the classroom? (majority of them nodded)		
Da Li: I agree that classroom communications are important, because we don’t get this kind of opportunity often outside of the classroom.	Reframe the same question: Is it worth it to try to make changes? Group response: Mostly agreed. Belief: Classroom learning experience is rare.	
Angie: We say, “predecessors plant trees and posterities enjoy the shade.” For me, this Chinese saying is about	Story-sharing: Angie’s overseas schooling experiences	Agency (be the change): requires a sense of

Case Study 1: Small Group Discussion and Student Presentation	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
<p>social responsibility. I want to share some of my personal experiences in the US: towards the end of each semester, we usually share with each other and the teacher our honest feedback—what works and what doesn't, in order to improve the class for future students. Also, sometimes, students at different years would come to certain events which were organized for them to share their experiences or suggestions etc. All of those reflected our sense of responsibility towards ourselves and towards others. Otherwise, how can we demonstrate our collective spirit? Ironically, in Chinese schools, we love celebrating the face value of our collective spirit.</p>	<p>Belief: Students practice social responsibilities through sharing feedbacks, communicating with students of different academic years, and making improvements on classroom learning environment.</p> <p>Conflicts: There are more events for undergraduate students to participate and communicate. Graduate students' life is more isolated with only small personal circles.</p>	<p>responsibility to self and others</p> <p><i>Problem-posing</i></p> <p>Preconditions for grassroots activities: individual leadership; group spirit forming; empathy building; an open and trustworthy group atmosphere.</p>
<p>Da Li: When I was an undergraduate, we had way more opportunities to communicate, even though sometimes we were forced to participate in certain events. Now, we don't have many opportunities for graduate students to participate and communicate. We only have our small circles.</p>	<p>Follow-up question: Any grassroots activities in the past?</p> <p>Tactics:</p> <p>Precondition 1: Some individuals' initiatives are essential to any bottom-up activities.</p>	
<p>(Jia Lin came in. she was late for our session.)</p> <p>Angie: When we were undergraduates, say, we sensed more of a group spirit, had we done anything grassroots, meaning initiated by students? (<i>The group was quiet for a few seconds</i>). Probably, the kind of group spirit we experienced the most was collectively following the direction or the calling from above. Or we might as well call it a top-down collectivism.</p>	<p>Precondition 2: Playing together helps forming a group spirit.</p> <p>Precondition 3: Empathy building when playing together.</p> <p>Precondition 4: A relaxing and trust atmosphere helps each individual to open up.</p>	
<p>Guo Li: I think the possibility of having any bottom-up activities depends on some individuals in a group. If some individuals, such as me, love playing, they might organize the group to play together.</p> <p>I think the experience of playing together is important to the formation of the cohesive force in the group. For instance, I started to feel much closer to</p>		

Case Study 1: Small Group Discussion and Student Presentation	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
some of us in our SHI-MEN after playing together with them.		
Angie: I agree. It could be a foundation for the relationship. We get to know each other more and create empathy towards each other when we play together. Then, if we plan to do other things as a group, we are more likely to work together to resolve issues.		
Da Li: I agree. A relaxing and trusting atmosphere will help each individual to open up.		
Angie: Right. We have to build trust in order to claim we are a group. Now back to our topic, if we all have the wish to make some changes to our situation, will you be the one who gathers everybody together and initiates the activity?	Reframed the question (Since the group did not answer my previous question directly): Will you be the initiator (of a change)?	<i>Problem posing: Agency challenge</i> Story 2: One failed initiation of a group activity.
Jia Lin: I have tried. But failed. Other than group presentations in the classroom, we don't really have many organized collective activities for us to get together, so, I tried to arrange a get-together event. It was in May—all the peach flowers were in blossom. The invitation was sent to about 60 Communist Party members and the Party applicants to enjoy the peach flower. My intention was to offer an opportunity for the members to know the applicants better so that the members can make more informative votes on the applications. I ended up having 9 responses. I even made a big banner for the get-together event. However, on the day of the event, it rained. We had to take a rain check. And we did not make any further arrangements.	Storytelling: A failed initiation of a group activity. Conflicts: People are not kin to group activities. Attitudes: People don't see the point or the value of participation.	
Angie: Maybe the group did not get the point of the event?		
Jia Lin: Right. Actions come naturally after recognizing the importance of the issue.		
Angie: Organizing and participating in collective events are important. I used to feel powerless a lot. Then, I realized	Storytelling: A story on how one individual feel	

Case Study 1: Small Group Discussion and Student Presentation	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
<p>what's between me, as an individual, and the collective group. Imagine you throwing a stone into a pond; a ripple will be generated from smaller circles to bigger circles. Our actions influence others. Even if the influence is so tiny, it still counts. Then, people who are influenced by you might start his/her own ripples, which will touch more people in similar ways or different ways. It is a butterfly effect. What I am doing right now with you all is like dropping a stone to a pond. Be aware that it is not just about dropping a stone—you take the responsibilities and risks that come after you initiate your responses. But I believe the possible rewards always make the effort worthwhile—you are no longer an isolated individual; you are an individual in a connected group. And your sense of belonging will make all the difference.</p>	<p>connected to a larger group or the society. Subtext: we need to actively make connections. Tactics: <i>Precondition 1:</i> A sense of belonging leads to a sense of responsibility, which in turn leads to actions. <i>Precondition 2:</i> We need a shared external resistance or a shared goal. <i>Precondition 3:</i> The central issue has to be relatable to students—the stake has to be high. Students have to recognize the importance of the central issue, which leads to a proper attitude.</p>	<p>A sense of belonging leads & a sense of responsibility; a shared external resistance or a shared goal; recognizing the importance of the central issue</p>
<p>Da Lin: A sense of belonging always goes hand-in-hand with a sense of responsibility, which will lead to actions.</p>		
<p>Qi Li: I think we need a shared external resistance.</p>		
<p>Angie: As a matter of fact, many nation states are using this strategy — creating a shared enemy.</p>		
<p>Qi Li: It does not have to be a shared enemy; it could be a shared goal.</p>		
<p>Angie: Sort of like creating a kind of shared emotion. When the emotion is more positive, it might end up becoming a slogan for the group; when the emotion is more negative, such as a trade war enemy...</p>		
<p>Qi Li: It was based upon my own experiences. When I was an undergraduate, the university asked for students' feedback on the Mission Statement of our program. Not many students were interested in participating. However, when it was about how the credit works, students voluntarily</p>		

Case Study 1: Small Group Discussion and Student Presentation	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
organized themselves to offer suggestions.		
Angie: In other words, the issue has to be related to our lives. The stake, which works as a stimulus, has to be high enough for the students.		
Xiao Si: To echo what Jia Lin has said, we have to first of all realize the importance of the issue. Otherwise, in a classroom setting, sometimes, some students would have this kind of attitude—like, whatever!		
Angie: So, a proper attitude.		
Jia Lin: I like group presentations, because personally I need a little push, when it comes to study. Our group discussions do not get formalistic. For instance, we have 14 people in a class. The day before each class we upload our PowerPoint to our shared online plate form. Our teacher’s rule is that we all have to talk in the class. Everybody has to contribute. I attended classes with two cohorts in two different academic years from the same program with the same teachers, which formed a different class atmosphere.	<p>Storytelling: A positive group discussion experience. (Tactics) Rules/reasons behind a positive classroom experience: (1) manageable class size; (2) prepared presenters and audience members; (3) everyone has to talk in the classroom.</p> <p>Belief: When there are males in an otherwise all female classroom, male students offer different ways of thinking, which changes class dynamics.</p> <p>Another opinion: Since in many cultures, when there are both males and females in one space, males tend to dominant the conversations. Therefore, females might share more when there is no male present.</p>	<p>Story 3: A positive group discussion experience.</p> <p>Critical thinking: Gender dynamics/stereotype</p>

Table D4

Dramaturgical Coding of Case Study Topic 1 (Part 2, Fourth Session)

Case Study 1 Small Group Discussion and Student Presentation	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
<i>Prompt question: What made people see X in a different way?</i>	
Angie: We have been mainly talking about the negative part of the group presentation as a kind of classroom management formation issue. What about some positive elements?	Critical thinking: Discuss on some positive elements of the group/student presentations: (1) presenters can benefit from it more; (2) relationship building among classmates; (3) opportunity to practice public performing (4) learn from each other (5) appreciate each other
Da Lin: The presenters should benefit more.	
Da Li: To some extent, it should help building relationships among the students.	
Angie: So, it might be a good idea to rotate groups.	
Jia Lin: We do that in our classrooms.	
Angie: Especially given the fact that many of us tend to sit in the same spot each time.	
Xiao Xin: A male student in my class used to tremble when he presented due to his nervousness. But towards the end of the semester, he was much better and relaxed.	
Jia Lin: We can learn how other's minds work. Again, actions come naturally after recognizing the importance of the issue. I was not a good student. Now I really want to learn as much as I can. Therefore, I always put my whole heart into learning.	
Angie: And to show our respect to others and others' way of learning and presenting. There is always so much to discover.	Critical thinking: Discussion on other forms of classroom organizing and learning strategies.
Angie: Other than this sort of traditional classroom organizing formation, do we have other forms of classroom organizing and learning strategies?	
Jia Lin: We visit kindergarten classrooms.	
Angie: Internship or practice teaching.	
Da Li: We sometimes have handout reading materials, case study, digital materials, etc.	
Angie: What we are experiencing now could be seen as incorporating games into a traditional classroom setting. Last semester, I had a class in the art and the science of teaching in higher education. Each student in the class chose a form of teaching strategy/philosophy to present on, in the form of the strategy/philosophy we had chosen. In other words, we combined theory (form) and practice (content)—creating a pedagogical praxis. I chose multiple intelligence as a teaching philosophy. And my way of presenting my topic was through playing games—a bodily kinesthetic learning style.	Story-sharing: One example of a classroom teaching strategy/philosophy.

Table D5

Dramaturgical Coding of Case Study 2: The Dialectics of Failure

Case study 2: The Dialectics of Failure	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
David: I don't think the given prompt is quite suitable for our topic.	Conflicts (Circumstances of failure experiences): (1) did not meet self-expectations and/or others' expectations; (2) a sense of failure=embarrassment	Critical thinking: self-reflection
Jia Lin: Let frame the question this way: under what circumstances do you experience failure?		
Xiao Xin: Self-expectations and others' expectations.		
Xiao Si: There are always criteria.		
Jia Lin: We don't have to make it sound so grandiose. It could be explained as I feel embarrassed, which might be attributed to my failure.		
Jia Lin: One of my own experiences of failure was related to my own expectation. But, if I see it from another perspective, I was not failed. Here is the story: It was related to my direct admission process. I applied for a university student counselor position here, since I am experienced with works related to student affairs. I remember the interview was in the morning. Then, around noon time, the result was announced, I was not on the list. I was quite disappointed. On the same day, in the afternoon, I was interviewed for the position of volunteer teacher in rural areas. As an undergraduate, I was also a member of the association of volunteers on campus. I was accepted and became a volunteer teacher for a year. I felt a great sense of failure when I knew I lost my chance to be a university student counselor. But it turned out that a volunteer teacher suits me even better. If I were chosen to be a university student counselor, I would not have experienced such a tremendous amount of affection from students and teachers in my voluntary school; and I would not have learned so much from preparing for my daily	Story 5: A personal story, with the moral of the story being (beliefs): (1) An experience of failure is context based, with a nature of temporality. (2) A sense of failure=a feeling of disappointment Attitudes (Group responses): (1) Showing our group spirit: applaud Jia Lin. (2) A philosophical analysis: unrealized realistic self-expectations (Jia Lin 's case) vs unrealized unrealistic self-expectations. (meaning Jia Lin had a reason to feel disappointed at the time.)	Critical thinking: self-reflection Critical engagement: (1) Offering a positive reinforcement: the group applaud Jia Lin. (2) Showing an affirmative attitude through making a philosophical analysis on Jia Lin 's story.

Case study 2: The Dialectics of Failure	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
<p>classes. Therefore, I did not fail in that day.</p> <p>David: Applause!</p> <p>Xiao Si: There might be two scenarios: Unrealized realistic self-expectations and unrealized unrealistic self-expectations. Jia Lin 's story is in the first category.</p>		
<p>Xiao Xin: In my opinion, we feel failure when we could not meet self-expectations and/or others' expectations. For instance, you and your teachers are going to make a co-presentation on your shared project. You presented. After, you were not content with your presentation. And your teacher did not think you had expressed what she intended to share either.</p> <p>David: There is one distinction between "I think I failed" or "YOU think I failed." If I did not meet my own expectations, it is my failure. If others think I did not meet their expectations, they think I failed. Those are two different subjects of failure.</p> <p>David: From the dimension of time, failure could be a temporary concept, which is related to the overall goals—as long as my long-term goal is still there for me to approach, I don't care about a failure in a phase of my overall process. If I fail in my long-term goal, my mood might fluctuate quite a bit. However, we can always rephrase our long-term goals. For instance, my paper is rejected by a tier one journal, but accepted by a tier two journal, which is fine. I can always write more papers and keep trying. In this same example, if I had never tried a tier one journal, but only submitted my paper to a tier two journal, even if my paper were accepted by the tier two journal, I might still experience failure, because I should have tried the tier one journal as well.</p>	<p>Story 6: Conflicts: A story of failure by fulfilling neither self-expectations nor others' expectations.</p> <p>Beliefs (Group response): A philosophical distinction on two different subjects of failure: "I think I failed" or "YOU think I failed" (1) Our attitudes toward failure matter. (2) People with certain personalities experience more failures.</p> <p>Beliefs (A philosophical analysis on failure): (1) Failure as a temporary concept: disregard those insignificant failures in the process of approaching the long-term goal. (2) Self-expectation (not external reaction) as a trigger for a sense of failure (with a personal example) (3) Failure as a concept with developmental phases: our understandings of failure changes.</p>	<p>Critical thinking: self-reflection</p> <p>Critical engagement: The group conducted a series of philosophical analyses on failure to help the storyteller (Xiao Xin) understand the concept of failure better.</p>

Case study 2: The Dialectics of Failure	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
At this moment in my life, if I could not successfully defend my dissertation within two years, I would say I failed. Because I have a clear plan for myself, it would be a rather difficult fact for me to accept if I had to extend my dissertation writing time. In a few years, I am sure that my understanding of failure will change again. That is way I say the concept of failure is a concept with developmental phases.		
Jia Lin: I once saw a line in social media: “In the end, everything will be okay; if it is not okay, it is not the end yet.” It is an attitude we could choose to face failure—only an episode in life.		
David: Those who care and those who are clinging, experience more failures.		
Xiao Xin: I think we are now talking about the second prompt: What makes X continue?		
David: (1) “Misfortune might be a blessing in disguise”, which means failure could be just a phase. (2) If you overly care about something, you could be hurt more once you lose it. if you invest more emotion to your goal, you will experience failure more intensely. Comparatively, a person of utilitarianism might take failure more lightly. (3) we need to overcome and oppose the kind of failure imposed by other’s opinions.	Conflicts: how to decrease a sense of failure Tactics: (1) know that failure could be just a phase (2) invest less emotion to your goal (3) overcome other’s opinions	Problem posing & action-seeking
Jia Lin: What leads people to let X continue?		
David: Why so difficult?	Belief: A sense of failure is in our human nature, which is inescapable.	Agency: a positive or a negative attitude
Jia Lin: It will happen whether you let it or not.		
David: It is in our human nature.		
Xiao Si: Once failed in one thing, the person might always hold that sense of loss when encounter some similar situations in the future. A sense of failure is like a stigma in this sense.	Attitudes: (1) An experience of failure as a stigma in life; (2) An experience of failure as a lesson for us to learn.	
Jia Lin: The most important thing is to learn from our failure and become stronger, since we could never stop failure from happening.		

Case study 2: The Dialectics of Failure	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
<p>Xiao Si: It is also related to our level of confidence. When I was in my high school, I had a classmate, who tried so hard to improve her math performance, but she failed almost each exam. Slowly, she started to believe that she was just too stupid. Others started to see her the same way and had very low expectations toward her.</p> <p>Jia Lin: We can sum it up with two scenarios. One, I give up; and I admit that I am a failure. Two, I don't care about small failures in the process; I will keep fighting for my ultimate goals. Do we agree on those two?</p> <p>David: Agreed.</p>	<p>Belief: Story-sharing (failure as a stigma): A story of a high school classmate⁴⁶: multiple experiences of failure lead to lower self-confidence, and lower external expectations.</p> <p>Tactics (Summary of two scenarios): “I give up” or “keep fighting”</p>	
<i>What gets people to do something about X?</i>		
<p>David: For me, if it is just a failure on my way to my bigger goals. I don't care. I won't even take time to reflect on those failures. I simply try another way. Sometimes, I could feel embarrassed too. But I carry on whatever I need to do the next day. “All roads lead to Rome”—keep trying other ways. Our goals are our ultimate drive after failures. First, we need to have a real long-term goal. Secondly, we can always reshape our goals.</p> <p>Xiao Si (to Jia Lin): This could be applied to your stories at the very beginning—you changed your goals from university student counselor to a voluntary teacher.</p> <p>Jia Lin: I realized it after being a voluntary teacher. For me, another drive to take action is when a decision of mine failed a project which affected others, I would take action to resolve the problem.</p>	<p>Conflicts: how to conquer a sense of failure: Tactics: (1) Our long-term goals are our ultimate drive after failures; (2) we can always reshape our goals (3) If my failure affected others, I will focus on taking action to resolve the problem.</p>	Problem posing & action-seeking
<p>David: It is much easier to categorize a rational goal. But when my emotion gets involved, I find it difficult to theorize it in order to find a pattern.</p>	<p>Belief: a rational goal is much easier to tackle than an emotional goal.</p>	Critical thinking: self-reflection;

⁴⁶ Researcher's note: Xiao Si would share other's story; instead of her own stories.

Case study 2: The Dialectics of Failure	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
<p>For instance, I only teach in an afterschool tutorial class. I had a student with such a good manner. He always bowed to me when he meets me and when he leaves me. His grandpa who is pretty old took him to and from the class each time. I really wanted him to succeed; and I was so happy if he performed well. However, realistically, I don't have to care. How the student performs had nothing to do with my academic life or anything. In other words, <i>when I don't want to disappoint somebody, my mind goes beyond my utilitarian goals. It is hard to find patterns, like under what circumstances I could be affected emotionally.</i></p> <p>Jia Lin: A sense of responsibility.</p> <p>David: But I don't really invest my affection to all the polite students.</p> <p>Angie: It is like we cannot really explain why we fall in love with this person, but not that person who shares similar traits.</p> <p>David: Right, right, right.</p> <p>Jia Lin: It can be categorized as the connection between sympathy (or a sense of responsibility) and a sense of failure.</p>	<p>Story 7: <i>"When I don't want to disappoint somebody, my mind goes beyond my utilitarian goals. It is hard to find patterns, like under what circumstances I could be affected emotionally."</i></p> <p>Attitudes (Group responses to David's story):</p> <p>(1) It is related to sympathy or a sense of responsibility</p> <p>(2) Emotional involvement is often mysterious. (David agreed.)</p>	<p>Critical engagement: through an affirmative attitude to confirm David's sense of responsibility; and to ease David's frustration in trying to find patterns in his emotional responses.</p>
<p>(Angie came to check in.)</p> <p>Angie: anybody shared stories about the shadows of past experiences of failure? For instance, Da Lin shared with us his story about how he was hurt by her girlfriend in college, which changed his viewpoint on and his behaviors in a love relationship.</p> <p>Jia Lin: It won't happen on me.</p> <p>Angie: Why some of us are more susceptible to our previous painful experiences; and some of us are more insusceptible?</p>	<p>Conflicts: Why some of us are more susceptible to our previous painful experiences; and some of us are more insusceptible?</p> <p>Different attitudes:</p> <p>Will an experience of failure be a stigma in one's life?</p> <p>Yes: Xiao Si, Da Lin, Xiao Xin⁴⁷</p> <p>No: Jia Lin, David</p>	<p>Critical thinking: self-reflection</p>
<p>Story 4:</p> <p>Guo Li (Guo Li volunteered to share a story): I normally love to share my ideas in the class. And I love to raise questions. Last semester, I was really enthusiastic about participating in class discussions.</p>		

⁴⁷ Xiao Si, Da Lin, and Xiao Xin told stories of failure as stigma in their lives during our case study discussion.

Case study 2: The Dialectics of Failure	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
<p>Once, after a small group discussion, we were supposed to give suggestions to each other. So, I started to offer my suggestions to a male student, such as some possible blind spots in his statements. He started to get impatient and kind of angry towards me. Maybe it was my fierce and straightforward tone—when I was talking, I got serious and excited; then I forgot to watch my tone or attitude. Ever since that incident, whenever he shares his opinions, I would keep silent. Once, even another girl in the group noticed my pattern and asked me why I became quiet. Slowly, I realized that most people in the group don't share. I share and contribute my idea. But most of the time, I don't receive any feedbacks. Therefore, I can't learn anything from them. Also, I wonder whether to them, I am too much of a controlling person, which indirectly prevents them from sharing their thoughts. I am just guessing here, because I really don't know the reason behind their quietness. One the other hand, they don't share their thoughts during some group discussions; then they present in front of the whole class using your ideas. You started to feel plagiarized.</p> <p>Angie: Because they would repeat what you have said without giving you credit.</p> <p>Guo Li: Yes. Therefore, I was really earnest in the first semester. When it came to the second semester, I started to feel super disappointed—I rarely raise questions now, because there is no point to do so. There was one time a Shi-Jie explained to me something. She said, “many of the students are not well prepared for the class. If you challenge them seriously, they might think you have some problem, because you might make them look really bad, and they will lose face.” All in all, this semester, many teachers do not hold high standard towards us anyways.</p> <p>Angie: When you were sharing stories, I was connecting the scenes in your stories with the short Playbuilding video we have watched together—Are You Listening. It might be a good idea to utilize inner dialogues to perform this theme. The idea of “thought plagiarism” could be metaphorically compared with the exchange of apples. If we picture the scene right now, it could be presented in this way: I give you an apple. You took the apple and told the rest of the group that it is your apple.</p>		

Table D6

Dramaturgical Coding of Case Study Topic 3 (Fourth Session)

Case Study 3 Perform or Hide	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
Summary of the story: Da Lin started the group discussion with a story of his. Last night, there was an outdoor open karaoke party on campus. Da Lin really wanted to get on the stage and sing a song. But he worried that he might not be able to follow the rhythm perfectly. He waited and waited. Even though he thought he could do better job than some of the students who were on the stage. He was not able to gather enough courage to get on that stage that night ⁴⁸ . Da Lin: Actually, something similar happened before. Once our department had a party. I stepped up to the stage and sang a song. But I did not follow the rhythm very well. I felt very embarrassed.	Story 9: An experience of embarrassment becomes a stigma in life. Da Lin's Mentality: imperfect performance= embarrassment Belief (1): Winning is important because people judge you based on it. Belief (2): One failure could ruin all the previous accomplishment. Challenge the beliefs: Ruin what? From whose perspective? Critical thinking/practice: we need to question those ambiguous statement or myths through asking critical questions.	Critical thinking: self-reflection (negative memory & negative effect) Critical engagement: personal is political (Do not only blame yourself) Identity (Other's opinions matter) Critical thinking (praxis): Challenge and question those ambiguous statements, beliefs.
Angie: You felt embarrassed yourself. Or you think others would laugh at you.		
Da Lin: Nobody said anything after. But I could feel. There was one Xue-Di, who mentioned to me that I did not follow the rhythm. The incident became a shadow in my life. Since then, I stop singing in public. But I actually want to sing, because I believe if I can sing very well with accompanying music and lyrics on big screen, I am not a bad singer.		
Angie: Do you apply this mentality of yours to other scenarios in life? It is like, you have to be really prepared and be perfect before any kinds of performances?		
Da Lin: Pretty much. I have to be certain.		
Angie: Do you think this kind of mentality has something to do with our accustomed evaluation criteria of good student and bad student? In other words, we are only entitled and encouraged to perform if we are good enough. For me, it is such a one-dimensional, fascist standard. I have seen so many amateur performances outside of China—		

⁴⁸ Researcher's note: in our 5th session, when we meet international professors, Da Lin sang a song for the group. He tries to overcome his own shadows.

Case Study 3 Perform or Hide	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
those performers are far from being professional or perfect. But, so what? why do we set up such high standards for ourselves?		
Guo Li: There are so many people in our society who care about you winning, not just participating. In front of your face, they might say, “it’s the participation that counts.” But they just say it.		
Qi Li: There is another situation—you have been very successful, but one failure could ruin all your previous efforts. Therefore, we became more cautious.		
Angie: Are you talking about the dropping of your confidence level or are you talking about the society does not allow you to fail at all?		
Qi Li: Maybe it is not that serious. Hahaha		
Angie: Sometimes, things are like that. When we really dig into “the thing” we seriously worry about, its power somehow diminished. Very often, we are tied up and intimidated by our own imaginations.		
Qi Li: But when we are in the moment, we cannot help but thinking of the worst scenario.		
Angie: The way I see it is that we need to take the time to think it through at least once. Then, in the future, when you are in a similar situation, you know the situation is not as serious as you might have imagined. Guo Li mentioned “somebody” expect us to win or to succeed. We might want to ask how important the person is in your heart?	<p>Belief: We hide to avoid self-disappointment.</p> <p>Challenge the behavior: Should we practice privately until we are perfect? Da Lin and Qi Li disagree.</p>	Critical thinking (praxis): Challenge our daily behaviors.
Qi Li: For me, self-expectation weights more. I disappoint myself.		
Da Lin: We chose to hide because we believe that our performances could not meet our own standards yet.		
Angie: How to resolve it? keep practicing in private, until we are perfect enough for ourselves?		
Da Lin: Not really.		
Qi Li: We don’t have a space and time to practice.	Belief 1: We perform in order to be recognized or approved.	Identity (other’s opinion or approval
Da Li: But why do we want to perform? We want others to recognize or approve us? Or we need cheering from the audience?		

Case Study 3 Perform or Hide	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
Da Lin: Enjoy the moment of performing, I guess. To express self.	Belief 2: We perform to express self ⁴⁹ .	matters; self-expression matters);
Angie: You mean, not only you are looking for cheering from the audience, but also communicating and connecting with the audience with your performance and your emotion.	Belief 3: The connection between the performer and the audience matter too.	Connection with others matters
Da Lin: Yes.		
Angie: You might not be perfect with the rhythm, but audience might resonate with and moved by you because of your emotions. Can we still call it a successful performance?		
Guo Li: I think Da Lin holds a higher expectation to himself, because he thinks he has the potential to be a very good singer. It is different if an average singer sings with a goal to entertain the audience, and to make them laugh.	<p>Belief: Our self-expectations determine our behaviors.</p> <p>Challenge the belief: we should question the rationales behind our self-expectations.</p> <p>Problematizing a one-dimensional evaluation standard.</p> <p>Ways to challenge the standard: (1) One example: A multi-dimensional standard leads to the expansion of one's potentialities.</p> <p>(2) Pay attention to those shiny spots in others and never feel shy to compliment others.</p>	<p>Critical thinking: personal is political</p> <p>Problem posing & action-seeking</p>

⁴⁹ Researcher's note: Da Lin also expressed his desire to express self in the questionnaire.

Case Study 3 Perform or Hide	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
<p>Angie: For me, one person's self-expectation still has a lot to do with the one-dimensional evaluation standard. We all should learn to appreciate others with multi-dimensional standards. For instance, my American mentor often appraise me in a way I had never thought of about myself, which helps me to open up myself to all the possibilities. If we can really pay attention to others, we will find those shinny spots in others. Because we all have our own unique experiences, the way we connect to others will vary. Never feel shy to compliment others when you feel that special connection or when you spot other's shinny traits. This kind of compliments is not abstract, but concrete and therefore, sincere. As a future teacher, if we can spot each student's special talents, I believe their life choices in the future will be broader as well.</p> <p><i>(Angie then left the group; and went to check on the other case study group)</i></p>		
<p><i>Da Lin: What makes X continue?</i></p> <p>Qi Li: The sense of security.</p> <p>Guo Li: The sense of security is super important to me. In our group, I am very open and honest. Outside, I generally have to pretend or disguise.</p> <p>Da Lin: Agreed. Others might interpret your performance as showing off.</p> <p>Qi Li: What about with strangers? Since they don't know us, if I embarrass myself...</p> <p>Guo Li: The worst situation is with those quasi-stranger and quasi-acquaintance.</p> <p>Da Li: We have to double-check our behaviors in a classroom setting.</p>	<p>Ranking scenarios to perform self:</p> <p>(1) The best scenario—within a trustworthy and supportive group⁵⁰</p> <p>(2) An okay scenario—with total strangers</p> <p>(3) The worst scenario—with those quasi-stranger and quasi-acquaintance (such as in a classroom setting)</p>	<p>Critical thinking: self-reflection</p>
<p>Qi Li: In your (Da Lin) story, you were surrounded by strangers.</p> <p>Da Lin: Face-saving.</p> <p>Da Li: Because he (Da Lin) already had his previous bad experiences.</p> <p>Guo Li: Deep inside, you have low self-esteem. You are not very outgoing.</p> <p>Da Lin: (Da Lin nodded)</p>	<p>Group discussion on Da Lin's case:</p> <p>Reasons behind his behavior of hiding self: face-saving (even in front of a crowd of strangers); previous bad experiences; low self-esteem; personality (shy).</p>	<p>Critical thinking: analyze Da Lin's behavior</p> <p>Critical thinking: Self-reflection</p>

⁵⁰ Researcher's note: Da Lin, Guo Li & Qi Li saw the space I provided for the group as a safe space. Da Li did not comment on it. Was she not feeling safe/comfortable enough in the group?

Case Study 3 Perform or Hide	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
<p>Da Li: Will you ask for a girl's to be your Wechat friend, if you like her?</p> <p>Da Lin: I won't.</p> <p>Da Li: I thought so. One of my roommates asked a boy his Wechat.</p> <p>Guo Li: Did she succeed?</p> <p>Da Li: Yes.</p> <p>Qi Li: We are off the topic now.</p> <p>Da Li: What I wanted to say was that I will not ask either.</p> <p>Guo Li: I dare not, either.</p> <p>Da Li: Why?</p> <p>Da Lin: Personality?</p> <p>Guo Li: I have to save my face.</p> <p>Da Li: I think we are really off the topic now.</p>	<p>A spontaneous poll: Will you ask a person to whom you are attracted to be your Wechat friend?</p> <p>Da Li, Guo Li, and Da Lin answered No.</p>	
<p>Guo Li: I think we just have to protect ourselves in our society.</p> <p>Qi Li: In the classroom, if I am not sure with my answer, and nobody else raise their hands either, I would be quiet too. But if one person answered the teacher's question which is quite similar to my answer, I would feel super regretful—"I was thinking of the same," I would think.</p> <p>Da Li: I would feel the same. After the teacher announced the correct answer, I always hate myself for not being brave enough to answer the question.</p> <p>Da Lin: Why not?</p> <p>Da Li/Qi Li: Because we are not certain.</p> <p>Guo Li: We grew up with "standard answers."</p> <p>Da Li: It has a lot to do with other's level of tolerance to your mistakes.</p> <p>Da Lin: But the problem resides mainly in us.</p> <p>Da Li: We assume other's reactions to our mistakes.</p> <p>Guo Li: Other's negative judgement is....</p> <p>Qi Li: Sooo depressing.</p> <p>Da Lin: That is why we are afraid of making mistakes.</p>	<p>Discuss on reasons behind the behavior of hiding and a sense of insecurity⁵¹:</p> <p>(1) Negative reinforcement in various classrooms we grew up with.</p> <p>Giving wrong answers=making mistakes=teacher's negative attitude/judgement</p> <p>(2) The hegemony of standard answers: worship the power of authority, repress creativity and authentic voices, and lower one's level of confidence.</p>	<p>Critical thinking:</p> <p>Naming our "enemies": negative reinforcement; the hegemony of standard answers</p>

⁵¹ Researcher's note: The group know very well the rationales behind their repressive behaviors. We just need to critically challenge those negative reinforcements—stereotypes, stigmas, imagined critiques; and actively build positive reinforcements in life, in order to free ourselves.

Case Study 3 Perform or Hide	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
Da Li: Since we were really young, we knew that if we offer a wrong answer, our teachers would be disappointed.		
Guo Li: When I was in middle school. One of my teachers' differentiation of attitude was so obvious when a student offers a correct answer or a wrong answer.		
Da Lin: Really?		
Guo Li: Yes. I remember nobody dared to answer our teacher's question at the time. we grew up in this kind of environment.		
<i>Da Lin: What gets people to do something about X?</i>	<p>Problem: Under what kinds of circumstances will a person perform in the classroom?</p> <p>Action plan 1: A support for action: a nice, patient, and low status teacher who needs students' help.</p> <p>Action plan 2: An internal urge for action: We wishes to help out.</p> <p>Action plan 3: Another external push for action: a role model.</p> <p>Belief: (1) As long as an external nudge is needed, those behaviors are still passive.</p> <p>(2) A dialectical view on a role model.</p>	<p>Problem posing & action-seeking</p> <p>Critical thinking: Dialectical analysis on an external nudge and on the role of a role model</p>
Guo Li: I think it will be really hard to change our mindset.		
Qi Li: No. No. No. If nobody in the classroom responded to a teacher's question; and the teacher asked again in a super gentle tone, I would raise up my hand, and say, "I will go."		
Da Li: I will do as well, if I think the teacher really needs a student to...		
Qi Li: Fill a vacancy!		
Da Lin: At bottom, those behaviors are still passive. To hide is to be passive — meaning a nudge is needed. Anything else?		
Qi Li: A role model? But, sometimes, if the role model is too good, we will be intimidated too.		
Guo Li: I want to ask you guys a question: have you ever experienced an urge to prevent others from joining your group of which you are quite comfortable with? ⁵²	<p>Guo Li suddenly changed the topic to inclusion or exclusion of a newcomer to an already developed group.</p> <p>They all prefer NOT to accept newcomers.</p>	<p>A switch of the topic to "inclusion or exclusion of a newcomer"</p> <p>Self-reflection: "No" to a newcomer.</p>
Qi Li: Don't want others to join us.		
Guo Li: Rr to prefer your old pals to your new group of friends.		
Da Li: I think it should be a general feeling.		
Qi Li: My roommate and I don't want others to come to our room.		
Guo Li: And the newcomer will not feel comfortable either, since the original group has already formed a relationship.		

⁵² Researcher's note: I wonder what made Guo Li think of this topic?

Case Study 3 Perform or Hide	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
Da Lin: Since we are talking about this topic, I have a situation. Three of my friends and I are planning to go to inner Mongolia together. Then, a classmate of mine wants to join us. I worry that my friends might not feel comfortable with the idea because they don't know my classmate well.		
Guo Li: You are right. Besides, you will have to take special care of your classmate.		
Da Li: Meanwhile, you feel bad to reject your classmate.		
Da Lin: Therefore, I have not given my classmate a definite answer yet. (<i>Three girls all suggest Da Lin to find a way to reject his classmate. Then they started to chat about traveling.</i>)		
Da Li: What changes people's minds about X?	A critical reflection on culture: In order to promote performing, we need to reexamine our culture, which discourages self-expression, goes against outstanding, and honors humbleness.	Critical thinking: A critical reflection on culture
Guo Li: I don't think people will change their minds.		
Qi Li: I think people can. If our society encourage self-expression, I believe many people will rush to show themselves.		
Da Lin: It has something to do with our culture.		
Guo Li: Chinese people are more reserved.		
Da Lin: And this old saying: The outstanding usually bear the brunt of attack.		
The group: Exactly!		
Da Li: We are not encouraged to be too conspicuous.		
Guo Li: So true!		
Qi Li: But isn't a university supposed to...?	Relationship between human beings and their environment: Belief (1): a university should be a place to nurture outstanding talents, and to encourage self-expression. Belief (2): A university setting and the society outside of the university are two very different societies. Belief (3): We are spices of our environment: Either we change our environment or be altered by our environment.	Critical thinking: (1) a dialectical relationship between people and the environment they reside in. (2) the functions of a university Problem posing & action-seeking
Guo Li: A university setting and the society outside of the university are two very different societies. Here, in the university, we talk about life choices. People who are outside of the university care about earning more money; and have no time for any other concerns.		
Qi Li: But if we don't nurture students in the university, where can we find outstanding talent?		
Da Lin: I think our attitude will change slowly.		
Da Li: Back to our previous topic on classroom formations. I believe one of the goals of the student presentation was to		

Case Study 3 Perform or Hide	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
encourage us to express ourselves. We all need to consciously express and perform ourselves.	Problem: how to change people's minds about performing Action plan: be the changing agent in an environment; cultivate healthy educational culture; and work on reshaping some of our traditions.	
Guo Li: It is like forming a habit. when I was in high school, my first-year experience was very positive—our student leaders were passionate and energetic; and their energy affected the whole class. In my second year, I went to another class—this class's atmosphere was opposite of my previous class. At the very beginning, I was acting like before, but my new classmates would see me like I was a freak. Slowly, I was changed by my new lifeless environment. The atmosphere of my university class was very dull too! Then, three of my classmates went to another university as exchange students. When they came back, their changes were quite obvious—they would actively exchange with teachers in the class; and they were more confident. I supposed they were affected by their new environment; then they came back to us and became the changing agent. The atmosphere of a class is really essential.		
Da Lin: A conclusion?		
Da Li: Environment, educational culture, and traditions.		
<i>Da Lin: What stops X? Let's share some stories.</i>	Story 10: Da Li shared some positive reinforcements she felt in a classroom setting.	Problem posing & action-seeking: positive reinforcement
Da Li: When I was an undergraduate, in one class, we were supposed to discuss an Indian movie: 3 Idiots. My presentation was about how to define success based upon the movie. My teacher gave me very positive feedback, which made me feel that my presentation was valuable. If I was given a rather negative feedback or no feedback, I would have regarded my performance as meaningless. Since we perform in front of others, we need feedbacks from the group/audience.		
Guo Li: We all want to show the best side of us to others. Because we don't want to be disliked. Only if we face people we trust deeply, we might reveal our true self.	Public image management strategies: (1) only post positive stuffs on social media (masking)	Identity (other's opinions matter)
Da Lin: I agree. That is why we usually only post good things on our social media.		

Case Study 3 Perform or Hide	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
<p>Guo Li: When I was a freshman, I used to post both good and bad things on my social media. Once, a person told me that nobody cares if you had a bad day. Then, I started to only post positive stuffs; Otherwise, those who don't care about you will see you as too pretentious.</p> <p>Da Li: That is why I never post anything about my emotions or feelings.</p> <p>Guo Li: To be honest, I have the urge to post my feelings.</p> <p>Da Lin: That is why we are all hiding ourselves.</p> <p>Guo Li: That is why many people have more than one Wechat accounts.</p> <p>Qi Li: I know a person who has 5 Wechat accounts.</p> <p>Guo Li: For instance, a doctoral student might have one "private" Wechat account which is associated with her/his fun friends; and another "public" Wechat account, where he/she posts serious academic stuffs.</p> <p>Da Lin: If I post some silly stuffs, I block many people.</p> <p>Guo Li: Sometimes, if you are being goofy, people might see you as not reliable. Therefore, we have to disguise.</p>	<p>(2) own more than one social media accounts (multiple faces)</p> <p>Rationale behind the above public image management strategies:</p> <p>(1) We all want to show the best side of us, because we don't want to be disliked.</p> <p>(2) If you are being goofy, people might see you as not reliable</p>	
<p>Da Li: It is not hard to understand. For instance, I think Qi Li's personality is more clear-cut. It is harder for her to disguise herself. That is why one of our Shi-Xiong once said he was afraid that he could not control Qi Li.</p> <p>Guo Li: Because your patterns of behaviors are consistent in different settings.</p> <p>Qi Li: I think it is too tiring to be different persons in different settings. What if you have people from your different social circles meet you in one setting? How would you behave?</p> <p>Guo Li: It is our social ability—learn to wear masks.</p> <p>Da Lin: This is our destiny, as social beings.</p> <p>Da Li: I always desire to be in a comfortable circle.</p> <p>Qi Li: I want to behave consistently.</p> <p>Da Li: It is a double-edged sword.</p>	<p>Different beliefs:</p> <p>(1) it is a social ability—learn to wear masks (Guo Li) (Guo Li once told a long story about how she painfully learned to wear masks.)</p> <p>(2) it is our destiny, as social beings, to wear masks (Da Li). (but Da Li wish to be in a comfortable circle, because wearing mask is a double-edged sword.)</p> <p>(3) it is too tiring to be different persons in different settings—not doable (Qi Li). (Consistency is important to Qi Li)</p>	<p>Critical thinking: Different opinions on wearing masks</p>

Case Study 3 Perform or Hide	Dramaturgical Codes	Elements of Protagonistic Agency
<p>Qi Li: As a matter of fact, I hide because I think I am not good enough to be in a position of a leader. I worry that I am not competent. Therefore, I decide to hide myself.</p> <p>Da Li: Self-efficacy.</p> <p>Da Lin: Career-readiness.</p> <p>Qi Li: But we might underestimate our ability.</p> <p>Da Li: Therefore, you need others to approve you.</p> <p>Da Lin: Therefore, we need to practice, in order to know ourselves.</p> <p>Qi Li: What if it turns out that I am truly incompetent?</p> <p>Da Lin: Looking for help.</p> <p>Da Li: I envy those people who has the courage to do act out their ideas.</p> <p>Da Lin: Sometimes, we just need to endure a short moment of embarrassment. Then, things will get better and better.</p> <p>The group: agreed.</p> <p>Qi Li: Once we are there, we are forced to focus on our tasks.</p> <p>Da Li: Therefore, perform if we wish to.</p>	<p>Story 11: Qi Li's confession</p> <p>The group encourage Qi Li to be more confident and perform when she wishes to.</p> <p>Offering strategies to reshape Qi Li's mentality:</p> <p>(1) Look for help when needed.</p> <p>(2) Endure a short moment of embarrassment if necessary, because things will get better.</p> <p>(3) Focus on the tasks, not others' opinions.</p>	<p>Critical engagement: a group spirit; an empowering moment through demonstrating self-help, and self-improvement with careful examination of socio-cultural influences.</p>

Appendix E

Group Two's Collective Creation: A Script (6th Session)

Scene 1

The students sit in a classroom. The teacher walks in with a syllabus in her hand.

The Teacher: Students, you are graduate students now. You should show some differences with undergraduates. Therefore, for this class, we are going to adopt the formation of group discussion and presentation.

Student A (BOREDOM): (internal monologue: Not again! Group discussion and presentation! Each class takes the same formation. We already had many classes requiring groupwork last semester. So what? Nobody took it seriously. I am sure it will become formalistic as always.

Student B (HAPPY): (internal monologue: WOW, groupwork! I love it. I will take the opportunity to showcase myself. Teacher will for sure pay attention to me too.)

Student C (don't care): Oh.

Student D: (internal monologue: lazy teacher)

DA LI (THE TEACHER): Okay, if no comments, we are going to group up and pick a topic on my syllabus. Report to me your grouping and topic choices after.

Scene 2: Small group discussions in the classroom

"Who wants to be the presenter?"

(internal monologue: I don't want to do it. don't ask me.)

(internal monologue: whoever capable is fine for me. If I volunteered myself, and did a bad job, I might be blamed by the group.)

"Whoever wants to do it, go for it. otherwise, I can do it too."

(After a few seconds of silence)

"Okay. I will do it."

The presenter: I plan to present it this way: First of all..., then,... in the end,....

(internal monologue: Errrr, when can you finish? You think you are a star.)

(internal monologue: Okay, you do it. I can take a break.)

(internal monologue: Makes no sense. I am hungry)

The presenter: This is how I interpret this topic. Do you have any suggestions or other ideas?

(internal monologue: You have shown so much confidence. What else do you need from the rest of us?)

(internal monologue: What should I have for lunch?)

(One student is still playing the phone)

The presenter: (internal monologue: It is not fair at all! I prepared everything myself. This kind of group project is totally meaningless.)

Scene 3

Presentations in the classroom

A student presenter is presenting. The teacher keeps her eyes on her phone.

The teacher: (internal monologue: nothing significant. Obviously, the students are not well-prepared.)

(internal monologue: Hmm, makes sense. I have to write it down.)

(internal monologue: Reading the text. Boring!)

(One student is still playing the phone)

(Another student looks around; and noticed that the teacher is playing her phone too.

Internal monologue: Even the teacher is not paying attention. Why would I care?)

The presenter: Thank you for your time and attention. Any questions or suggestions?

One student (raises up his hand): I have a question.

(we can use some props, such as swords, to symbolize and exaggerate the fierce scene of discussions between the presenter and the student.)

(internal monologue: A bunch of fools. What worth fighting for?)

(internal monologue: I think I agree with her!)

(internal monologue: I want to join the discussion too!)

(the student who was playing the phone put down the phone for a few seconds, then look back to the phone again.)

The teacher: (internal monologue: great atmosphere for discussion! Well done)
(the teacher smiles with satisfaction)

The teacher: The presentation is well prepared. The discussion was fantastic.

The presenter: (internal monologue: that's it? Even no feedback from teacher?)
(internal monologue: sooooo, this is our teacher's standard? So perfunctory!)

The teacher: How do you like the groupwork formation so far?

(students keep silence)

(internal monologue: Why won't the teacher just lecture? I need something that could help my publication record.)

(internal monologue: A teacher should offer some feedback and comments)

(internal monologue: a teacher should help student presenters.)

Appendix F

Stories From Some Audience Members and My Thoughts

I have included stories from six audience members who were graduate students in my research university. I had one-on-one conversations with each of them before or after the final performance. Much like my primary participants, these six storytellers had displayed a singular passion and voice. They sought ways to connect with others and the broader society. Jim rejected the vulgarization of education and found himself having nobody to talk to. Tony experienced exclusion when he was younger; he had been trying to find happiness between inclusion and the freedom to be himself. Grace had been looking for the right people to do meaningful things with. Meng's abstract passion for learning needed to lead to some tangible goals. June found inspiration through our five-hour conversation and was ready to inspire others. Deng shared with me his earnest wish to do something practical for society, after being in school for over 20 years. I share their stories to explain how protagonistic agency can mean different things in different contexts. At the same time, there are shared values across their stories, such as the desire to be accepted, to be connected, to make a difference, and to construct meaning.

Jim's Pursuit of Freedom

Jim and I had a short but very intriguing conversation during the final performance. I couldn't help but notice that Jim kept rejecting ideas that were not accompanied by alternative action plans. For instance, his sentences often started with "I hated it...No, not like that... None of those... I don't know."

JIM: I believe that theory and practices, or academic life and daily life, could be separated. For me, since you are doing your Ph.D., you don't have to care about others' doubts. What I meant was you should not allow secular perspectives to affect your life. As Plato had said, one is a world of truth; the other is a world of opinion. These two worlds can be separated because there isn't a definite association between having a degree from

a higher education institution and an elevated working ability measured by the market value.

ANGIE: What are the purposes of doing research?

JIM: I am not sure about that. (some audience members laughed)

ANGIE: Because you think it interests you?

JIM: Yeah.

ANGIE: For whom do you want to do your research?

JIM: It is like what Plato had advocated, knowledge for its own sake. This kind of life in itself is noble.

ANGIE: If “knowledge for its own sake” means not for others, is it for oneself?

JIM: No. Not for myself, either.

ANGIE: Do you have an imagined audience group in your mind? For instance, when you write an article, do you have a potential audience group you want to share with?

JIM: I see myself as apathetic. My emphasis is comparative education. People asked me, “so you introduce, translate, and draw lessons from foreign educational theory and practices”? I would say none of those. I hated it when people ask me, “what do you do with the philosophy”? My bachelor’s degree is in philosophy. When I was doing my master’s in education, I hated it so much when asked, “Are you going to be a teacher when you graduate”?

ANGIE: What kind of research are you doing now?

JIM: I don’t know. (Some audience members laughed again)

ANGIE: I want to know how you perceive what you are doing.

JIM: Right. But For now, I only know what it is not. What my research is actually about? I am still...

ANGIE: Contemplating.

ANGIE (summed up the conversation): “Okay, your world is genuinely binary (audience members laughed again). I noticed that you made many rebuttals to negate others’ perceptions about you. My follow-up questions are about who you are or who you want to be. So far, you don’t have any external purposes other than pursuing truth for the sake of knowledge. For you, a university is a perfect place or the only plausible place to do so. Other sites only imitate or distribute the knowledge produced by the university folks. And there is a possibility that they might misinterpret the knowledge.

JIM: You can say that.

After our brief conversation during the final performance, Jim contacted me to have another conversation. I happily agreed. Jim elaborated on his perspective on research and expressed his biggest frustration, aloneness.

“My Personal interest is to research for its own sake”

Jim: The academic world is very pure or absolute. The purpose of conducting research is to generate knowledge; benefits for the society are by-products. People in academia do not have to think of things like shaking the world or rocking the boat of reality.

Jim: I used to value theoretical/scientific significance more than societal significance. I used to think that they contradict each other. However, after some reflections, I realized that there is a tension between the two, while the theoretical/scientific significance should be our priority.

Angie: Do you have imaginary readers or anticipated social impacts?

Jim: Yes, consciously, or unconsciously. I research nationalism and citizenry education. Of course, I wish our country to be better. But my main goal as a scholar is to understand the relationships between and among those key academic concepts."

Angie: You research is primarily for your interest?

Jim: No. Not for me. It is for the sake of knowledge production. One of the main functions of a graduate program is to train scholars. You cannot freely choose whatever topic you want. It has to be a meaningful topic for the field. It has to be challenging enough so that you can learn to be a real scholar through the process. Meanwhile, it cannot be too challenging that you cannot finish it.

Angie: In other words, the topic has to be a real problem for the field and has to match your academic ability. What about your interest?

Jim: My interest is to research for its own sake.

"My biggest frustration is that I have nobody to talk to"

Angie: What constitutes the most frustrating thing for you in academia?

Jim: Nothing.

Angie: What about life in general?

Jim: Having nobody to talk to. (he laughed) Because I realize that I always present different opinions on many occasions. It is hard to find someone with whom you can see that click. Here, in my field, there are not many serious scholars.

Angie: Instead of some utilitarian goals, you have a higher-level pursuit in the field.

Jim: You are right. It could be my ambition, which is related to the meaning of my life.

Angie: Meaning your academic world is highly related to your life in general?

Jim: I won't say that. I mean, academic research is academic research; other things are other things. My frustration is that nobody talks to me. Academia is my ambition, but not my ultimate belief, nor the source of the ultimate meaning in my life. I might stop doing academic research at some point in my life.

Angie: I kept asking you questions without allowing you to ask me anything.

Jim: Oh, no. My biggest frustration is that I have nobody to talk to. I enjoy our conversations.

Angie: I, too, enjoy understanding people with different perspectives and different philosophies. It is a process of expanding my capacity for tolerance.

Jim: One of the negative aspects of life is that, on a national institutional level, we lack respect and tolerance toward different meaning-making choices.

Angie: Or we need a space for individuals to think independently.

Jim: To bring it down to my reality, it means that nobody talks to me.

Angie: You are not the only one who complains about it. Several people, I have talked to recently shared with me similar frustrations. Many of us feel isolated on campus.

Jim: It is okay if you don't understand me, as long as I know myself. I am not good at empathizing anyway.

Jim hated stereotypes. For him, being in the field of education did not necessarily mean you had to become a teacher. Jim assumed that connecting theory and practice, or connecting academic life with other parts of life, could lead to pragmatism. For Jim, “Academia is academia; life is life. Don’t care about others’ opinions.” Jim’s perspective reminded me of a fictional composer, Leverkühn. Some think the fictional composer Leverkühn in Thomas Mann’s novel *Dr. Faustus* symbolizes “the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere” or an “art-for-art’s-sake” approach—to see “art as a culpable withdrawal from life” (Cobley, 2002, p. 50). To adopt Fromm’s (2001) terms on freedom—like Leverkühn’s situation—I looked at Jim’s approach to academia and life as an escape from freedom or negative freedom. He wanted to break away from stereotypes or social expectations. His new jail bars were the negation of what others have said to him—“I am not what you think I am.” He was still trying to figure it out. Keeping a distance from his old social network put him in a lonely position. He frequently felt he had nobody to talk to.

When it came to daily campus routines, Jim appeared to be enjoying his positive freedom. Jim offered some practical suggestions to deal with students’ daily hassles including finding strategic spaces beneath the university or societal rules, being aware of self-censorship and overcoming the shyness in our personality. For Jim, it is about volitional quality and interpersonal skills.

JIM: The content of the script was realistic; however, very often, we can find resolutions within ourselves, despite the prevalence of often shitty environments.

ANGIE: We are talking about both internal and external reasons. One of the preconditions for creating agency is that you need to understand and demonstrate what you want to do first.

JIM: This is what I have been saying: Academia is academia; life is life. Don't care about others' opinions. A deeper reason is that many of us don't know ourselves at all.

ANGIE: I'm sure that we all want to understand ourselves. The problem is that many of us don't know how to know ourselves. Therefore, I think some theoretical and methodological inspirations might help. My participants and I co-created a theatrical space that might serve as an inspirational space for some actions and transformations.

Some of Jim's major perspectives included: (1) A two-world theory: "University folks live in a world of truth; laypeople (who hold secular perspectives) live in a world of opinion." (2) Two value systems: An academic world and a world outside of the campus that operates by market value. (3) A clear-cut division of labor with a hierarchical structure: University professors (who produce knowledge) versus schoolteachers (who teach and distribute knowledge). (4) Knowledge for its own sake or researching for its own sake. From a critical perspective, Jim's binary worldview could seem rather extreme. However, when situating his worldview in his academic context, his approach started to make more sense to me. He did not want to be bought by government funding to conduct the kind of empirical research that celebrates government policies. He said, "the field of education in China lacks its own discourse system. Therefore, it has to rely on political discourse. For instance, many published papers often start with political discourse or government policies." According to the data provided by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2019), there are 2,663 regular higher education institutions (HEIs) in China of which 749 (about 28%) are nongovernment HEIs. Approximately 72% of higher education institutions are government-funded and state-run. The leading Chinese universities are almost all state run. According to the same data, of the 815 institutions providing postgraduate programs, only five are nongovernment institutions. The Chinese Communist Party

(CCP) has substantive control over universities through its omnipresent party branches in schools. The CCP secretary in a university normally outranks the university president (Rudolph & Szonyi, 2018). To protect his intellectual integrity from the lure of government funding and its accompanying constraints, Jim chose to commit his efforts to disciplinary knowledge and development. Two years later, he told me, “I have learned that the world is not a clear-cut, black and white world. Consciously, I started to communicate with people who hold different points of view.” We keep evolving — to me, that is the most crucial part of life.

“Majoring in Education Offers Me an Opportunity to be Happy”—Tony

Tony and I agreed to meet at 9:30 in the morning. I arrived first and ordered a cup of hot cappuccino. He showed up right after me. I asked, “what do you want to drink? My treat.” He answered, “I will have whatever you ordered.” The waitress brought us our coffee and asked whether we need sugar. I said, “No, thanks. I prefer bitter coffee.” Tony said, “I don’t need sugar either then.” That was our first one-on-one encounter. He gave me an impression of politeness and sweetness.

We initially planned to meet in the afternoon. The day before our scheduled meeting day, he informed me he had to change our meeting time to the morning. He was working on his thesis proposal at the time and said, “My mentor is really busy. I have no idea when he will have time to meet me. Therefore, timewise, I have to give my mentor a priority.” When we were chatting in the coffee shop, he had to pick up a phone call. It was his mentor. After hanging up the phone, Tony apologized and said, “Sorry, Shi-Jie, I have to go to the administration building to deliver a document on behalf of my mentor. I promise I will be back very soon.” Even though I assured him to take his time, he came back sweaty and breathing heavily. He ran back. I thought about our group conversations on the multilayered relationship between mentors and mentees in China.

Master's students are very often on call all the time—whenever their mentor needs them, they are expected to show up immediately, which could be a voluntary or involuntary choice from a student's perspective. Part of the Chinese culture is to respect your teachers and treat your teachers like parents.

“In China, people hate you if they think you are showing off. So, I use my shyness to cover it. I developed a self-protective mechanism,” he said. “When I stand up in the classroom and express myself, I temporally separate myself from the group. Right after my public speech in the classroom, through exhibiting my shyness to the group, I put myself back to the group again. In this way, they won't conceive my action as showing off.” He paused for a few seconds, then added, “Characteristically, I am a bit shy. But still, I don't think it is right to adopt this strategy, consciously or unconsciously.” I expressed to Tony that I believe we all wear masks daily, because we have to play different roles in life in different contexts. “I perform too! I think you are too harsh on yourself,” I said.

At the beginning of our face-to-face conversation, I made an insensitive comment. Luckily, Tony listened to my explanation and acknowledged my good intention. I told Tony I wanted to share stories that were commonly experienced by many graduate students and was interested in knowing each person's unique experiences. “You are special,” I expressed to him. I said it as a compliment to his sensitivity, courage, smartness, openness, and his pure soul. To my surprise, he straightforwardly told me, “I don't feel comfortable that you think I am different. I don't think I am different.” I explained to him the messages behind my compliment. He accepted my explanation. I was glad he expressed his discomfort straightforwardly, on the spot. I would have hated it had he not told me, and we ended up with a grave misunderstanding. After hearing

his stories, I could better understand his need to be accepted because he had been excluded and poorly treated for being true to himself.

I liked Tony the moment I first encountered him sharing with a group of students a painful memory. When he was a teenager, he was bullied for years by some of his female classmates because he behaved girly. I could tell from his voice and facial expression that he still was hurt. He tried to recount the painful tale as if it was somebody else's story. Then he read one of his favorite poems. I saw a courageous, sensitive, and romantic young man who dared to open himself up and share with others his vulnerabilities and his pain. My protective instinct was so pumped that I invited him for a cup of coffee a few days later. I wanted to make sure he had learned ways to protect himself because I did not want him to get hurt.

When we met, he shared that when he was in middle school a girl called him a lady-boy. He became enraged but was unable to respond. He said, "I am still angry when I think of what happened between that girl and me. Why was I so weak"? One day, he finally felt that enough was enough and made an abrupt change—never to show so-called girly behaviors.

At the time of our conversation, he had just returned from a 6-month study abroad exchange program. He had a roommate from Africa with whom he seldomly interacted. He said he was alone most of the time, sometimes lonely, though it gave him an opportunity to be with himself and to know himself better and deeper. On so many cold nights, he walked on empty streets aimlessly and thought of his past, his present, and his possible future. He thought he might be insecure because he worried that he might be lonely or unhappy, which kept him continuously searching for his self. He said, "I see a future me being a professor. In my seventies, one day, after finally finished negotiations on a public welfare project, I walk back to an apartment or a hotel room. Then I die that night due to a myocardial infarction. But before I

die, I would dance so gracefully and freely.” I confessed to him that I worried about him—I wanted to make sure that he could protect himself and blossom happily and freely. After our conversation, I received a message from him. He wrote: It turns out that it’s all out of care. Thank you so much for your kindness.

Despite the negative experiences and sometimes blue moods, Tony is a positive person. He participated in the improv game workshop I mentioned in Chapter 5 of this dissertation. When the group reflected on some of the games we played, Tony expressed that the game “I am a Tree” made him think. He said, “We all carry our dreams and plans at the very beginning of our stories. But what lies ahead of us is never predictable. We might have to readjust or even change our original plans at times. However, that is not a sign of failure; and we should not get beaten up for it either. Life happens. Each of us should learn resilience at a rather young age so that when we encounter hiccups in life, we could be resilient, strong, and carry on.”

During our final performance, the audience members and the performers discussed the relationship between theory and practice. Tony expressed that as a human being, seeking purpose and meaning is important. He saw two kinds of knowledge—practical knowledge and knowledge for our soul and happiness. For Tony, education, together with other fields, such as philosophy, sociology, psychology, and anthropology, help us in our search for meaning and purpose. He found value and excitement in that “useless knowledge” (knowledge for our soul), and he continued asking questions about self and society. Education is his career. He feels happy and content to be a student in the field of education.

“I Value a Tolerant and Non-Judgmental Attitude”—Grace

I sometimes see a stronger version of myself in her. I like Grace. She is tough but can also be sweet. She is smart but not aggressive. She is struggling in life but loves life too. She is

ambitious and a hard worker. I noticed her in Peter and Suzi's class. The class was practicing the "I am poem." She put her heart into writing the poem without showing much emotion on her face though. She had short bluish-grey hair. Her big almond-shaped eyes revealed to me some stubbornness. I intended to talk to her after the class, but I did not get a chance. A few days later, I ran into her on campus. I walked to her and said hello. She had the word "surprised" on her face, "Oh, Xue-Jie, you remember me?" I said, "Of course. Can I add you as a WeChat friend? I would love to buy you a cup of coffee or something." That was the first time I talked to her. The invitation might have seemed obtrusive, but she luckily accepted my invitation.

It turned out that she paid attention to me, too, in the class. She said she once took her boyfriend to the class just so that he could see me ("the translator sister"). Unfortunately, I did not go to class that day. She said, "it is even better now since we can talk face-to-face; and that I can get to know you in person." We met in a campus coffee shop. I was a bit cautious at the beginning of our conversation. I invited her quite spontaneously and did not want to sound intrusive. We hit it off almost immediately. She expressed that ever since she came to the university to obtain her master's degree, she had been looking for some role models. However, she could barely find any except for one or two professors. "I enjoyed a few professors' classes and learned a lot from them. But that was all I have been able to get so far from my master's program," she said. After our conversation, she wrote to me:

"We covered many topics today. In many ways, I have to say that I have never met anyone who resembles myself so much—for instance, our tolerance towards different issues and perspectives; our objective and nonjudgmental attitude when others tell stories or share opinions; and our wish to influence others as much as we can. I have been looking for this kind of person. Today I felt like we still had so much yet to be shared. I wish we could have more opportunities

to conduct some research together in the future. . . . After our conversation, I was wandering around on campus for a very long time. I realized that I can put new perspectives on so many things and that I need to keep asking myself what I want. It is so magical—I could reflect upon my life with calmness. . . .”

I was so glad to hear that she felt inspired and yet calm at the same time. Grace and Jim, and many other students, feel lonely. Students often feel ashamed to talk about existentialist crises in their lives because they don’t want to appear weak. About a decade ago, a friend responded to my existentialist struggles with the following comment, “You need to grow up. When you realize that you have the responsibility to support your future family and your parents, you don’t have time to think of these things”.

After my workshop, Meng approached me and said plaintively, “Xue-Jie, I want to set up a time to talk to you. I have been feeling lost for a while. And I tried to share my dilemma with people around me, but they don’t seem to understand me. When you shared with the class your feeling of being lost, I suddenly realized that you were at where I am now. I should talk to you.”

A Good Student Syndrome—Meng

One afternoon, we sat under a small traditional Chinese pavilion near the lake on campus. Meng is a second-year master’s student majoring in comparative education. She felt bored and tired of the repetitive nature of everyday life. “Each day looks the same to me. I don’t see a point in living”, she expressed. Meng did not know what to do next. Her two options were to pursue a Ph.D. and become a professor or find a teaching career in a K-12 school. She was struggling with both options, “But what if I am not talented enough to be a professor? Meanwhile, the second option is boring and unchallenging.”

I asked Meng, “What is your interest”? She paused then responded, “I love reading and studying.” “You can read and study whenever and wherever. Why does it have to happen in a doctoral program? Why do you love reading? What kinds of reading? What would get you excited about certain kinds of content? How do some reading materials change you even in the smallest way?” She couldn’t really answer these questions at the time. I suggested she conduct some in-depth self-analysis, starting from digging into her interests. Meng, and many diligent Chinese students have what I call “a good student syndrome”—they love studying, and this act of loving is an end in itself. They don’t know what else to do even when they don’t see a point in studying. Why with more education do our futures seem narrower? What can a master’s degree offer us? What might we lose while getting a master’s degree? I think the cultivation of passion and faith is more valuable than getting a degree. We need dreams and purpose and a meaningful life that is reflective and attentive and interwoven with other souls.

Meng is not the only one on campus who feels bored, anxious, and lost. Anxiety seems to be a common characteristic. A few days before my conversation with Meng, I attended a public lecture on Marxism and its contemporary value given by a famous Marxist scholar, Zheng-Yu Sun. Some of Professor Sun’s statements made a great impression on me. Sun stated, under a market economy, facing choices with no criteria, with an unbearable lightness in life — no meanings or goals — means that our very existence is doomed to be in a state of anxiety.

“Your Concept of Unfinishedness Broadened My Epistemological Boundaries”—June

When I was conducting this research project in China, June was a doctoral student majoring in school psychology. June and I started our master’s degree the same year. She recognized me when I was having lunch in a restaurant near campus even though we had previously barely talked to each other. She expressed that it was such a great surprise that she

came across me again; she had been thinking of me and was wondering how I was doing. She exclaimed, “Do you remember me? We lived in the same dormitory building. My room was across from your room. I always felt that there was something special about you. Then, I heard you went to America. I thought I would never see you again.” I invited her to attend our final performance.

During our final performance, June shared her stories about the relationship between theory and practice. After graduating with her master’s degree, she became a preschool teacher. “For five years, my daily routine was to resolve one problem after another. Honestly, I did not purposefully think of any theory I had learned from the university.” Two years ago, she thought she might need to learn more. She returned to her old university and applied to graduate school. “I felt lost for a while,” she said. “Many times, I asked myself: Why do I need a doctoral degree? What is the point of going back to school to relearn those theories?” One semester, she was the teaching assistant (TA) for a class called Developmental Psychology. Due to the responsibility of being a TA, she took the course one more time, giving it her full attention. During that semester she realized that many theories could be perfectly applied to her workplace and could transform her performance as a teacher. “Now, I have such a strong inner drive to read everything in the field of psychology in our library because I know now that I will be able to connect theory with my teaching practices. You need to find your own ‘turning point’ in life”!

After the performance, we set up a time to meet again and talked for 5 hours. We talked about our lives, our inner struggles, our wishes, and our doctoral research projects. The next day, June sent me the following message: “I woke up this morning and felt powerful. I think it is due to you and our conversation. About you, I have so many adjectives in my mind to describe you: free-spirited, pure, initiative-taking, fascinating, compelling, purposeful, not-bothered. You are

the most special girl I have ever met in the past few years. Yesterday, after our 5-hour conversation, I did not purposefully reflect on it. I waited to see after a good night of sleep, what stays in my mind. This morning, these messages are hovering around in my mind—your process-oriented worldview and the concept of unfinishedness broadened my epistemological boundaries. You are right—we keep exploring and pursuing; we are always on the road. Your attitude of taking initiatives in life showed me a highly feasible and surprisingly implementable way to open up endless possibilities in life. And your unique way of developing and discovering yourself—from the relationship with self to the relationship with nature, then the relationship with others—inspired me to hold onto the conviction that whatever ways it takes to construct ourselves, as long as we are comfortable with ourselves, with the world and others, we should continue our self-formation”.

Why choose to separate ourselves from others when our hearts are dying for connection? Fromm (2001) saw isolation as what man dreads the most because the need to be related to the world outside of us is as compelling as one’s bodily needs. Our “moral aloneness” (lack of relatedness to value, symbols, patterns) is as intolerable as physical aloneness (Fromm, 2001, p. 15). When Jim said, “I don’t care whether people understand me or not,” I believe it was an attempt to protect himself more than a wish. Deep inside, who doesn’t want to be accepted, acknowledged, and celebrated?

Fromm (2001) regarded pre-freedom, negative freedom, and positive freedom as three stages of human development. In the pre-freedom stage, the person relates to the world through the existing rule, norms, and socially expected roles and takes them for granted. Those connections provide a sense of security and a sense of belonging. In the second stage, the person tries to reject things such as traditional values and societal expectations and feels alone because

new connections have not yet been initiated. In the third stage, a pursuit of positive freedom brings the person to a state of being “free and yet not alone, critical and yet not filled with doubts, independent and yet an integral part of mankind” (Fromm, 2001, p. 222).

In this dissertation, there are many stories about isolation, competition, and aloneness. As a research group, we initiated copious discussions, engaged in meaningful relationships and discovered distinct forms of connectedness—a connection between body and mind, a connection between I and you, and a connection between a larger group (or society) and the single, atomized individual. We have the right to reject what society wants us to be, to pursue negative freedom. After the rejection, we need to reconnect with the world by redefining ourselves and our connections with society. This is a form of positive freedom. Protagonistic agency is an embodiment of positive freedom—freedom restored to living flesh.

Deng’s Wish to Be a Practical Intellectual in China

My critical friend Deng dedicated 20 years of his youth to reading and learning. Deng remarked, “First of all, reading books for me is not intentional behavior. You attended a university; you became a student; so, you read books. It is a sort of habitus.” Deng made an analogy, “Just like in ancient China, what the civil service examination assessed barely had anything to do with how officialdom operates— nowadays, formal school education hardly provides any insights for students on how to survive in our society.” Deng reflected on his own schooling experiences: as an intellectual who read for many years only to grasp the basic domestic dynamic of a discipline. Other than that, he did not learn anything. He identified himself as a systemic man—a man whose behaviors are deeply influenced by the structure of the system. In the past few years, he started to realize that he probably was not on the right track. Deng said, “At this moment, I am more of a traditional intellectual, who writes essays, publishes.

I have spent 20 years in school and study. I have received my master's degree. And now I have a job in an education institute. Without enough courage and perseverance, I am destined to be a teacher who simply talks about education from a disciplinary perspective, who is very unlikely to participate in social events/debates. But ideally, I want to broaden the social impact of academic scholars; and become a more practical intellectual, such as Fei Deng". He added, "Fei Deng cares about citizenry justice, which is a form of social responsibility. What is regarded as the responsibilities of intellectuals in contemporary China? A taken-for-granted research logic was formed in the 80s — to use western criteria to judge Chinese intellectuals' roles in certain historical events. The flaw is so fundamental because some western traditions or criteria (such as critiquing and protesting against the government) are inappropriate references in the Chinese context. It is the inertia of this research logic – linking intellectuals' responsibilities with historical judgments towards Chinese intellectuals using a Western lens – that narrowed our imagination with respect to Chinese intellectuals' social responsibilities. Otherwise, the intellectuals' responsibilities could lead to more practical issues. However, if we confine ourselves in a university setting, and within a disciplinary framework, it would be challenging for us to recognize the limitation of the research logic we have just mentioned. Scholars who are locked in academia can only use one theory to (dis)prove another theory. What else can they do?" Deng studies elite intellectuals in ancient China, such as Xing-Shi Shen in the Ming dynasty. Deng supported the position that fulfilling social responsibilities is not the same as critiquing one's government; it is about coordinating between the empire and other bureaucrats in ancient times (Huang, 1982).

Deng's role model, Fei Deng, represents Chinese grassroots activities which have not been widely practiced in China. Voluntary nonprofit organizations (NPOs) in China have a long

history, which can be traced back to 2,000 years ago (Zhou & Zeng, 2006). Due to wars and political conflicts, and other dramatic political and social changes that have occurred since the beginning of the 20th century, these voluntary organizations disappeared for decades until the market reforms in the late 1970s (Lu, 2009; Ma, 2006; Zhang, 1996).

It has been estimated that several million organizations are operating without registration in China (China Daily, 2011; Deng, 2010; Watson, 2008). Unregistered organizations are considered illegal in China. The Chinese government takes a double-standard strategy which is called “opening one eye and closing the other.” Zhou (2015) argued that the government encourages those unregistered grassroots NPOs, which provide social services that are not conflicting with government policies. However, those that challenge the authority of the government run the risk of being uprooted. Self-censorship sometimes is a much-needed strategy for the survival of many grassroots NPOs. Some researchers (Bentley, 2004; Shieh, 2009; Zhou, 2015) have pointed out that when an organization manages to meet its internal (i.e., member benefits) and external (i.e., market-based goals) missions, while at the same time occupying a social space created by the government’s social welfare gap, the organization could end up having more leverage in negotiating with the government and even influence policies.

Deng has been disappointed with the world of academia in China. He wants to make meaningful changes for people in need. He admires grassroots activists who have found their small but meaningful place in China. He witnessed and walked side-by-side with me throughout this research project and regarded my research project as a revolutionary movement in the classroom. He said, “for years, I have been looking for ideal classrooms from movies. You and your team have shown me a powerful possibility, because it truly just happened in front of me.” After watching our final performance, he posted the following comment on his social media

page: “A classroom full of laughter also bears the critical power of destroying the corrupted and the decayed.”