
2-4-2024

How I Obtained My PhD Admission Letter: A Reflective Interaction-Based Autoethnography

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Recommended APA Citation

Xu, Q., & Chia, K. (2024). How I Obtained My PhD Admission Letter: A Reflective Interaction-Based Autoethnography. *The Qualitative Report*, 29(2), 502-515. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2024.6380>

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Abstract

This account utilises autoethnography to explore how the “one-child generation’s” cultural context influences behaviours and character traits, focusing on the first author’s experiences during a 5-month doctoral program application. It examines interactions with the employer, unacquainted individuals, intermediaries, and family, encapsulated in three Episodes, to analyse the personality traits of this generation. The findings reveal that, though deeply rooted in traditional culture, character traits such as risk aversion, caution, and family dependency are not immutable. It highlights the potential for personal transformation through inward growth, proactive external engagement, and the support of families who challenge traditional norms. In terms of subjective meaning, the process involves expanding one’s world perspective outwardly, and it involves inward self-growth and self-establishment for working youth and generates value throughout life. It also provides a profound opportunity to understand and interpret our own cultural imprints. In terms of social interaction, this process vividly captures the emotional fluctuations and the proactive choices and changes demonstrated by individuals in their interactions with different subjects. This research offers valuable insights for individuals grappling with uncertainties and doubts in navigating their life and career paths.

Keywords

self-narrative, autoethnography, reflective, interaction, PhD in Hospitality and Tourism

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How I Obtained My PhD Admission Letter: A Reflective Interaction-Based Autoethnography

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This account utilises autoethnography to explore how the “one-child generation’s” cultural context influences behaviours and character traits, focusing on the first author’s experiences during a 5-month doctoral program application. It examines interactions with the employer, unacquainted individuals, intermediaries, and family, encapsulated in three Episodes, to analyse the personality traits of this generation. The findings reveal that, though deeply rooted in traditional culture, character traits such as risk aversion, caution, and family dependency are not immutable. It highlights the potential for personal transformation through inward growth, proactive external engagement, and the support of families who challenge traditional norms. In terms of subjective meaning, the process involves expanding one’s world perspective outwardly, and it involves inward self-growth and self-establishment for working youth and generates value throughout life. It also provides a profound opportunity to understand and interpret our own cultural imprints. In terms of social interaction, this process vividly captures the emotional fluctuations and the proactive choices and changes demonstrated by individuals in their interactions with different subjects. This research offers valuable insights for individuals grappling with uncertainties and doubts in navigating their life and career paths.

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Introduction and Background

Although the rest of the world has gradually relaxed their COVID-19 management regulations, the Chinese government has chosen to maintain its Dynamic Zero COVID policy, a more lenient method of managing low-risk areas and implementing strict epidemic control policies in cities and regions with newly confirmed COVID-19 cases. On 10 March 2022, I was living in Shanghai, China, when the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases began to increase. As a precautionary measure, the university implemented strict campus-wide restrictions to curb the spread of the virus. This included prohibiting lecturers and students from leaving the campus, moving all teaching activities online again, as well as stringently scheduling short on-campus interactions in separate batches. As a lecturer at the university, I was temporarily housed at an on-campus flat for faculty members. The spatial and social restrictions drastically changed the manner and timing of my interactions, and the hitherto vibrant campus was, effectively, an empty town.

Like many others, I was riddled with feelings of restlessness, anxiety, and confusion throughout my 3 long months of living in this restricted environment. However, this relatively solitary and isolated setting gave me the opportunity to reflect on the direction that my life was heading. The monotony of conducting online classes for students confined to their dormitories,

regularly visiting the cafeteria, and the limited time outside my flat and on campus led me to view life as a series of planned tasks, without any notion of who was doing the planning. This realisation prompted me to alter my current occupational and personal situation, listen to my inner voice, and pursue a doctorate.

It is a blessing that researchers, particularly those engaged in qualitative research, are skilled at repurposing personal experiences (e.g., Rothman, 2007), behaviours (e.g., Francis & Hester, 2012), routines, and emotions (e.g., Weststrate & Glück, 2017) as salient data points for an analytical framework. I, therefore, deemed it critical to use self-narratives to maintain a textual record that documents the process of applying for admittance into a doctoral programme. This enabled me to scrutinise my own subjective experiences and reflections during that period, as well as the underlying cultural attributes that influenced them, which served as a valuable resource for my autoethnographic analysis of relationships between the self and others, such as individuals at the university where I am employed, individuals and intermediaries, and my family.

The experiences experienced when applying for a doctoral programme markedly differ from the experiences experienced when conducting research during or after the doctoral programme. More specifically, these experiences range across multiple dimensions from confusion to frustration (Ridgway, 2022), exhilaration, fear, puzzlement, and stimulation (Stanley, 2015), as well as exhaustion and tedium (Ridgway, 2022) to significant imbalances between emotions and cognition (Teeuwssen et al., 2012; Wellington, 2013), and imbalances between learning and caring for children (Hutton, 2022), and even extending to issues pertaining to interpersonal relationships (Wilson & James, 2022). In addition, part-time and full-time PhD researchers will also experience vastly different experiences (Leach, 2021). The significantly different experiences that I experienced throughout my identity transition journey from a working lecturer to a full-time PhD student, between “in progress,” “finished,” and “in preparation,” as well as between “part-time” and “full-time,” all provide a narrative of the choices that I made using my own theoretical understanding and analytical skills. Therefore, as Syed Mohamed et al. (2020) state, a thorough examination of experiences as a doctoral candidate was essential, particularly the experiences during the initial planning phase. On this basis, this account will demonstrate how applying for a PhD unfolds and how it reflects broader ideas about path-choosing within its cultural setting.

Methods

As one of the unique qualitative research methodologies, autoethnography is particularly adept at capturing the elusive nature of objective reality through representations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), distinctly characterised by its ability to elucidate an understanding of specific phenomena through narrating past experiences (Schriever, 2021). It enables capturing intensely personal, emotionally engaging, and in-depth insights (Wall, 2008). Its adoption and evolution integrate diverse qualitative research traditions, like autobiographical, ethnographic, and narrative research. Moreover, it provides an opportunity to revisit the cultural spaces in which we are centrally embedded and to be involved in social construction, reconstruction, and deconstruction (Hickey & Austin, 2007). Consequently, applying this method in the context of my research will enable a detailed portrayal of pivotal moments in my PhD application journey. It will facilitate an in-depth exploration of the values and personality traits of the “one-child generation” imprinted by traditional Chinese culture, thereby offering a holistic understanding of the intricate interplay between personal experiences and cultural contexts throughout this process. These cultural imprints were profoundly manifested in my PhD application process and motivated me to rethink life direction, family concepts, and the shaping of individuals by culture.

Chang (2008) identifies four writing styles in autoethnography: descriptive-realistic, analytical-interpretive, imaginative-creative, and confessional-emotive, each offering unique perspectives for examining personal experiences within cultural contexts. Within this spectrum, I focus on analysing and interpreting the cultural meanings underlying the interactions experienced during the application process with an analytical-interpretive writing style in the account. The interaction alongside the process served as a pivotal medium for generating reflection and revealing underlying cultural dimensions. More specifically, I analyse and interpret the broader cultural meaning behind the PhD application process by conducting a reflective interaction-based autoethnography. I should explicitly state that I am not a sociologist. I am merely a doctoral applicant using autoethnography and self-reflection to navigate the transformation of my own life state and acquire extensive and in-depth sociocultural experience and comprehension. This transformation process is inseparable from who we are, how we engage with the world, and how we reflect on our lives (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). Notably, this account's term "I" denotes explicitly the first author. Although the narrative predominantly centres on my personal experiences, the other named author is involved in structuring the narrative, offering critical feedback, and fostering a more nuanced understanding of the experiences through collaborative discussion.

In terms of data collection, as Chang (2008) suggests, chronologically listing significant events or experiences from your life that pertain to your research topic and then describing these events could facilitate cultural self-discovery. Thus, situational re-enactments are used chronologically to examine and reflect on my application experience as well as the interactions that occurred between my employer, unacquainted individuals and intermediaries, parents and myself when applying for a doctoral programme over 5 months.

The emphasis of this undertaking is not on the factual aspects but rather on a comprehensive understanding of the situation based on the experiences of an individual (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). It comprises two sections: "presentation of experience" and "reflections." The first section is organised into three Episodes, which are aligned thematically and arranged chronologically. The second section builds its analysis of cultural considerations upon these Episodes. This structure is designed to be a meaningful data-generating exercise in portraying experiences and facilitating cultural self-discovery (Chang, 2008), also providing readers with a glimpse into insights (Pitard, 2016), triggering an emotional response and stimulating understanding (Humphreys, 2005).

Ethical considerations were addressed by ensuring that all individuals featured in these Episodes were thoroughly informed about our research activities and provided their verbal consent. In parallel, for confidentiality, vague, generic identity or single italicised capital letters refer to specific individuals throughout this account. The particular name of the institution and intermediary organisation was also not mentioned.

Episode 1: How Do I Choose?

On 31 March 2022 in Shanghai, I hesitated for a long time before finally dialling the Dean's number.

"Dean, I am planning to go abroad for my PhD and would like the school's support regarding my teaching schedule."

"Could you permit me to retain my position without pay?"

The Dean was very supportive and understanding of my pursuit for personal development on an interpersonal level. However, as the university was a private university, its

operations differ significantly from that of government-run universities and the process of consolidating an individual's time allocation and workload would be very complicated. Furthermore, it would be a challenge to effectively dedicate time and effort towards personal growth as each position has very different daily work schedules. Therefore, after thinking for a moment, the Dean said:

“If you insist on pursuing your PhD overseas, you will have to vacate the position.”

As the weather in Shanghai is unpredictable, finding a comfortable sleeping temperature is like striking the lottery. The incessant clattering of a loose air conditioning vent kept me company as I lay awake in bed that night replaying my conversation with the dean. His response to my request left me frustrated.

Despite working for the same university for 4 years and developing close relationships with my superiors and colleagues, the Dean had prioritised pragmatism over compassion and denied me the opportunity of pursuing uncompensated personal development, a flexible arrangement that many other academic institutions in China offer. As the clock struck midnight, I stood by the window gazing out at a darkened campus intermittently illuminated by faint yellow streetlights, torn between continuing with my work or leaving to pursue a PhD. While it was tempting to follow my heart, the prospect of living without an income was daunting and rendered my future uncertain.

I was born in the era of China's “One-Child per Family” policy¹, a population control measure implemented in China, aimed at curbing population growth, which culturally shifted family structures and societal norms towards smaller families, emphasising individual responsibility and resource allocation. As a young, single, and well-educated man with a full-time teaching position at a private university, I have been actively involved in both teaching and student management for the past 4 years. As I absentmindedly navigate the various on-campus classrooms, faculty offices, administration buildings, student residences, and counselling centres during my daily routine, I frequently find myself reflecting on the personal growth that I have achieved during my tenure and wonder if my aspirations for professional and intellectual advancement can co-exist with my current situation. I also question if my yearning for the “ivory tower” (Yep, 2022, p. 45) is still as intense as it used to be. Besieged by these thoughts, I decided to pursue my PhD abroad. However, as I lacked any prior experience with international university applications, I had no idea where to start. Nonetheless, I was eager to tackle the challenges that come with this new adventure and figure out a way of achieving my goals.

Episode 2: An Inner Torment

On 5 April 2022 in Shanghai, I stumbled upon the *Xiaohongshu*² app in a WeChat³ social group that I had with my colleagues. I initially thought that the app was geared towards women as most of my colleagues said that it primarily contained blogs on makeup and cosmetic tips. However, my perception of the app shifted after a colleague mentioned that it also features bloggers who share their experiences of studying abroad and preparing for exams. Intrigued, I

¹ The population control policy that the Chinese government implemented in 1979 aimed to address the country's excessive population growth. The policy was later relaxed in 2015, allowing some families to have two children. In 2021, this figure was increased to three children.

² Developed in August 2013, the app allows users to explore and engage in a diverse range of lifestyles.

³ It is currently the most popular app in China for instant communication among friends.

downloaded the app and searched for information on studying abroad. To my delight, the search results exceeded my expectations.

This was my first attempt at soliciting information about studying abroad from a stranger on the Internet. Although I was initially doubtful, I was surprised at how easy it was to get in touch with a PhD student, whom I shall refer to as *G*⁴, on the *Xiaohongshu* app who was studying at the same university and for the same major that I was interested in. However, my wariness of online scams has left me apprehensive of online interactions that require me to divulge information on my work and area of study.

“May I ask you some questions about the application process?”⁵

“Are you applying to study at the same university as I am?”

“Yes, I have no experience applying to overseas universities and would like to hear about your experiences with this issue.”

“Sure, you can chat with me on WeChat.”

“I can also provide you with the details of the agency that I used to arrange my study abroad.”

I was pleasantly surprised that *G* was so willing to share information without expecting anything in return. It made me wonder if she had faced the same obstacles as I did during her application process. Is that why she is so empathetic and willing to help? That night, we chatted from 10 pm to 1 am the next day and got to know each other better. She shared her experiences with the application process and her initial confusion, which led her to make several wrong decisions. Fortunately, exchanging information with others online eventually put her on the right track with her application. She also told me to look out for specific issues during the application process and shared the timeline of her own application process and even a remarkable incident involving her supervisor at school and the application process. Interacting with *G* that night left me with a lot to think about as well as a clearer perspective and direction regarding the application process.

At 9:00 am on 6 April, I contacted the study abroad agency that *G* had recommended through WeChat. The person in charge of the programme, whom I shall refer to as *T*, quickly verified my Friend Request and we began discussing my application. When she requested information on my educational background for the assessment process, I intentionally omitted the name of the university from which I had obtained my master’s degree and only identifying it as a “university located in southwest China.” This was due to my apprehension of unscrupulous agencies looking to profit by exploiting my personal information.

“You will need to submit a full list of personal information before we can assess the feasibility of your application.”

“You can trust us as we have been in this business for over 10 years.”

“This is the serial number of our company’s business licence.”

⁴ The texts in quotes were originally spoken in Chinese by the Dean; *G*, a PhD student who was studying at the same university and for the same major that I was interested; *T*, *B*, and *A*, staff from the study abroad agency; and my parents. I translated their quotes into English to enable the reader to comprehend and interpret the dialogue.

⁵ The data was reported on March 12, 2023.

“You can verify the authenticity of our business license online.”

After thoroughly verifying the agency’s details on China’s official business registration website, I submitted a complete list of my personal information. My intended admission date was October 2022 and the deadline to apply to my preferred institution was in mid-May 2022. This meant I was at a high risk of missing the deadline, which would postpone my admission by a year. As I was determined not to miss the deadline, I focused on expediting my application process.

After several days of careful consideration, I asked the agency to assist me with my application. To ensure seamless communication and good coordination, *T* created a formal WeChat group on 11 April 2022 that included me; *A*, the team leader of the study abroad programme; and *B*, the person in charge of the university application and visa application. From that point onward, the agency handled my application and operated very efficiently. The WeChat group communicated via messages, voice notes, and phone calls to provide everyone involved with frequent updates. The prompt sharing of all the relevant information facilitated the timely and effective collaboration of all members of the group.

“Your undergraduate and master’s degrees need to be certified by a Notary.”

“But the school is on lockdown at the moment and I can’t go out.”

“We can assist you given your current situation.”

“Pay attention to the size and background colour required for the visa photos.”

“Letters of employment and expert references must be in the template provided by the institution.”

By this point, a shared trust had formed between me and the WeChat group members, which alleviated my prior hesitance or reservations. My confidence in the agency’s expertise had increased significantly as well. As such, my priorities shifted to ensuring that I remained up-to-date and informed of pertinent information. The group eventually became a vital source of support, particularly due to the taxing demands of my teaching job. Without their support, I would not have been able to manage my rigorous workload of lecturing and managing students while applying to study abroad. On 28 April 2022, *A* sent a message in the WeChat group informing me that all the required application materials had been prepared and duly submitted to the target institution for a thorough review.

In Shanghai, a slight chill still lingered in the air, the school remained under lockdown towards the end of April and campus residents were only allowed outdoors in small groups and for brief periods. At precisely 4:30 pm, I embarked on my customary solo stroll from my flat to the lake, where I took the opportunity to rest on a bench. The lake water sparkled in the sunshine as the colourful flags adorning the roof of the administration building fluttered in the wind. A waterfowl lingered beside me, perhaps in anticipation of a tasty morsel. Unfortunately, its wait was in vain as I was empty-handed and unprepared for a bird-feeding session. Curiously, my two long-time companions, a pair of black swans who called the campus’ lake home, were nowhere to be seen. The once vibrant waters of the lake now seemed dull in their absence. With the wind rushing through and rustling the willows, I remained transfixed and still, silently awaiting the gradual descent of the sun.

Episode 3: A Beam of Sunlight

On 1 June 2022, the region in which my university was located attained the “Dynamic Zero” status and the lockdown restrictions were lifted. The only mandatory requirement was the wearing of face masks in communal settings. The annual dragon boat festival 2 days later signals the temporary suspension of the academic schedule in China. Taking advantage of this much-welcomed break, I travelled approximately 2½ hours to my hometown located about 520 kilometres from Shanghai via high-speed train.

My behaviours during social interactions indicate that my cultural identity is that of a typical Chinese individual, which is characterised by subtlety and restraint. The restrictions posed by the epidemic and the distance from home had prevented me from discussing my immediate goals and future aspirations with my parents in person. These discussions are important to me as I value their support and encouragement highly.

In traditional Chinese culture, it is customary for men to secure a stable and well-paying job after graduating from university (typically around 23-24 years of age) and dedicate the rest of their lives to the callings of family life, such as matrimony and raising children. I, on the other hand, enrolled in a 3-year-long research-based master’s degree programme after graduating. As I had a respectable teaching job at a private university in Shanghai and earned a reasonable salary after graduating with a master’s and my parents believed that it was time for me to consider married life. They were, therefore, baffled that their son, who was above the age of 30, now wanted to resign from the position that he had held for 4 years to pursue a PhD. This is unheard of in most traditional Chinese families, and is partly the reason I avoided properly discussing the matter with my parents.

As my work keeps me away from home for long periods of time and even though I make it a point to contact my parents regularly, it had been more than a year since we had met in person. My mother had meticulously prepared lunch for my homecoming and my normally stern father was smiling. Once we had eaten, my mother broached the topic by asking me if I was serious about resigning from my job to study overseas. After a deafening moment of silence, my father chimed in with the possibility of pursuing my studies while retaining my current position. My mother then proceeded to query me on the practicality of the matter, such as the country in which I intend to further my studies, the likely regularity of my homecoming, and the duration of the flight to my destination. Overwhelmed by their questions, I sat there speechless and unsure of how to respond.

“You’re 31 years old. You need to think carefully before making a decision.”

“How are you going to cover your tuition and living costs without an income?”

I calmly told them of my experiences regarding the issue at hand and my keenness to achieve my goal. This was met with resounding silence.

“If this is your final decision, your dad and I will support you.”

I was taken aback by my parents’ response to the situation. Given their staunch traditional beliefs, such a response was utterly unexpected. I had expected them to protest my decision to prioritise my personal goals over family and work responsibilities, which goes against the grain of conventional norms. Therefore, their open-mindedness was a complete surprise. Instead of pressuring me to conform to societal expectations, they encouraged me to follow my heart and pursue my dreams. As I gazed at the faces of my parents, bathed in sunlight streaming in through the open window, I noticed that my mother’s temples were streaked with

more grey hair, and my father's face creased with more wrinkles than a year ago. I suddenly realised how much they had aged since I had last seen them a year ago. Life is short, I told myself, and I need to live it on my own terms while making choices that align with my values and aspirations.

After eagerly waiting for several months, I finally received a WeChat message from *B* that I had an upcoming interview with the university that I had applied to. The message also contained valuable insights and advice for the interview. A short while later, *A* contacted me to discuss the necessary preparations and precautionary steps to ensure a stable internet connection and the dress code for the interview. I attended the online interview on 15 July 2022 and received my PhD confirmation letter on 29 August 2022.

The following morning, I contacted the Dean again, without hesitation.

Reflections

As Creswell (2013) states, embracing the author's individual story and the broader cultural significance behind the story is essential. Therefore, using the lens of autoethnography enables the reader to fully immerse themselves in the author's experience of transitioning from a salaried lecturer to a full-time PhD student. To interpret these experiences, researchers must immerse themselves in their consciousness, feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and judgments to understand the interactions and dialogues that can occur with others (Sela-Smith, 2002) and reflect on the cultural attributes underlying the dialogues, behaviours, and decision-making in their interactions.

Many studies have reinforced the notion that reflection plays a vital role in fostering personal growth and realising professional satisfaction (Brownhill, 2023), which deepens our understanding of the culture and society that we live in by experiencing and pondering narrative descriptions of interpersonal conversations, emotions, and self-awareness (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). This approach explores the life choices and the meaning of life from the subjective perspective of the individual in question to guide readers struggling with their own careers and life choices as well as inspire and lead them towards greater self-awareness and a better understanding of their own values and beliefs.

This account shows three significant Episodes of my (the first author's) application process through scene switching and attempts to interpret the cultural characteristics underlying these Episodes. In particular, when confronted with decisions, the choices of life direction, reactions to interactions with unfamiliar persons, and rethinking family relationships are all typical characteristics of the "one-child policy" generation.

This generation is formed by a unique "1-2-4" family structure, which includes one child, two parents, and four grandparents. Children growing up under this model are exposed to extremely high academic and professional expectations and pressures. On the one hand, children may receive all the resources and attention of the family under this model, and the burden of caring for the whole family and the elderly is heavily placed on this generation at the same time. It is the obligation and responsibility of children to take care of their elderly parents and continue the family lineage in this cultural system, which is entirely different from young people in Western cultures (Long et al., 2022). On the other hand, they were raised and shaped in an overprotective family atmosphere with no siblings.

As portrayed in the previous three Episodes, these factors have collectively shaped the generation's personality of being risk-averse, prudent, and longing for family support. It is why this generation is labelled on the internet as "flowers in the greenhouse" or "little emperors in the family." This also further explains why I had initially sought to "retain my position without pay" rather than a "resignation without hesitation" when I came up with the idea of pursuing a

PhD and negotiating with my workplace in Episode 1, although I failed. Obviously, if I were faced with a choice, I preferred the “safer decision” (risk-averse personality).

Such spirit and character permeate how I interact with unacquainted individuals, as portrayed previously in Episode 2, with an inherent sense of distancing and cautiousness (prudent personality). Nevertheless, to some extent, this has facilitated the development and prevalence of social media and online forms of interaction, where rapid acquisition of insight about the unknowable through these “non-physical” vehicles has become a regular practice in our generation.

Simultaneously, the Chinese value system is centred around the family rather than the individual, and traces of this can be found in our overall cultural system, where the belief that individual interests are subordinate to collective interests prevails. Being immersed in this family environment for a long time made me long for my parents’ support when undertaking critical alterations (longing for family support). What is more, I was immersed in a cultural space that prioritised “filial piety and moral righteousness,” where strictly following a single developmental route laid out by my parents and by tradition, study-work-marriage-childrearing, would be considered as “observing filial piety” and “proper family values/belief” in the traditional Chinese culture. Suppose someone attempts to change or disrupt the pattern, even with simple adaptations such as cycling/repeating the path, (e.g., study-work-study). In that case, he or she will hardly be understood. This track of growth has been engraved in the genes of every youth generation (the generation under the one-child policy), and if one is trying to reformulate this, the inherent cultural concepts will be disrupted and also challenge the existing individual development paths and family values under traditional beliefs.

Through a series of self-reflections, I (the first author) accomplish choice and transition. Self-reflection is critical in that it assists me in generating positive change rather than bringing me down, the meaning of my life-direction choice, the depth and scope of my family’s love, and the struggle with careers and life choices can be thoroughly interpreted after a complete self-reflection on the experience of applying for a doctorate. Specifically, the Dean had forced upon me the daunting task of choosing between my job and my aspirations. I reeled with anxiety at the prospect of losing my job and income, the psychological burden of duty to my family, and the uncertainty of my future (Episode 1). During early interactions between the members of a group, differences in culture and background may cause individuals to adopt defensive or passive behaviours, such as withholding personal information, mistrusting the other party, and using official channels to be verifying the information that the group provides (Episode 2). On another note, I had significantly underestimated the depth and scope of my family’s love for me. Despite their deeply ingrained traditional values, my parents were willing to transcend the conventional norms and provide me with the encouragement and support that I need from them (Episode 3).

After engaging in further interactions, immersion results in the development of behavioural patterns that reflect internalised cultural norms and values (Silverman, 2001). By constantly reflecting on every interaction and experience, I have retested the conclusion that sharing can be simple and pure while interactions can decrease the contrived barriers hindering good communication (Torres, 2016). Therefore, I am no longer apprehensive about sharing personal experiences or personal identification photos. The kindness and assistance of strangers online and the understanding and support of families both in the form of “conversations” have made me deepen my consideration of the implications and influence of interactions, especially at the level of focused interaction – “we” gather and follow a certain focus (the issue of applying for a PhD), then, commence a conversation (Van Kleef & Côté, 2022). Specifically, the meaning of life-direction choice can be thoroughly interpreted after a complete self-description and reflection on the application for PhD procedure. In terms of subjective meaning, the process involves expanding one’s world perspective outwardly and establishing

a broad range of connections. In parallel, it involves inward self-growth and self-establishment for working youth and generates value throughout the entire process of life. In terms of social interaction, the process recreates the entire interaction process from “suspicion” to “trust” and from “hiding” to “communicating,” viewed from the perspective of an “individual experience” as a reflection of one’s own initiative to choose and make changes.

Conclusion

This autoethnography investigates the cultural imprints behind the “one-child generation” through the experience of applying for a PhD. While there may be deep-rooted implications of the cultural environment, which shapes the character traits of risk aversion, caution, and longing for family support and prescribes a singular developmental path, it is not inaccessible to modifications: inward self-growth and change, outward proactive pursuit and exploration, and the support and encouragement of a family that transcends the traditional ideas have the opportunity to break out of that conventionality and be transformative. It provides a dynamic understanding of the one-child generation’s decision-making processes and their ability to navigate and potentially transform the prescribed societal and familial expectations.

This self-narrative and situational re-enactment-based autoethnography serves as an inspiration for individuals struggling with feelings of restlessness, anxiety, confusion, and hesitation to overcome the obstacles that arise when making decisions for life, work, and studies. Reflecting on the correlations between a choice and its effect on an individual’s position, family relationships, interactions with strangers, and everything else that it entails in this new space will, undoubtedly, shift one’s response in relation to the changes that have occurred (Zheng, 2021). When individuals are faced with the prospect of an uncertain future, using self-reflection to realise the friendliness, kindness, and trust that they have received from their family, strangers online, and other study-related acquaintances will serve as encouragement and support. Despite their deeply ingrained traditional values, my parents were willing to transcend the conventional norms and provide me with the encouragement and support that I needed from them; simple and pure interactions can truly decrease the contrived barriers hindering good communication, all of these have become the surprise obtained after re-enactment and self-reflection.

This surprise manifests in three dimensions. Firstly, it originates from within ourselves. By interpreting the application process, I discovered that if we gather the courage and determination to introspect and explore both internally and externally deeply, we are often astounded to find that, although traditional culture profoundly influences our character traits, we are still capable of forging our own paths. We have realised that societal expectations or norms do not predetermine our destinies, and exploring more possibilities for the future is meaningful and achievable. The second kind of surprise emerges from interactions with strangers, such as the individual G or intermediaries. Despite originating from a culture that tends to be conservative and cautious, we can still experience genuine trust and favour from strangers. Notably, this kindness is not necessarily rooted in financial interests; for instance, G has become my friend in the truest sense. Overly defensive or passive behaviour during these interactions hinders effective communication. The third dimension of surprise arises from the family’s support in challenging traditional norms. This experience tells us never to underestimate the power of familial love, particularly the tolerance and affection parents exhibit towards their children. Such love can transcend the limitations of traditional beliefs to a significant degree. These three dimensions of surprise — self-discovery, unexpected kindness from strangers, and the transformative power of familial support — collectively illustrate that, despite the profound influence of traditional culture, individuals within the “one-child

generation” have the potential to transcend these boundaries, redefining their paths in ways that align with their aspirations and values.

As mentioned earlier, previous research has examined and explored the lives and self-reflections of PhDs in different states of being (“in progress” and “finished”), which also involved different types of PhDs: “part-time” and “full-time.” However, there is less information about the individual’s state during the PhD application stage (“in preparation”). Through this autoethnography, the finding of this account was found to be consistent with Torres’s research in 2016, and I have also retested the conclusion that sharing can be simple and pure while interactions can decrease the contrived barriers hindering good communication. In parallel, the finding also reinforced Brownhill’s notion in 2023 that reflection plays a vital role in fostering personal growth and realising professional satisfaction. Recollecting my previous interactions provided “on-site”-like insights into a person’s process of applying for a PhD while revisiting these interactions gave me a clearer understanding of my journey and a foundation from which to embark on my doctoral pursuit that was based on conviction and courage. I believe that by sharing and analysing my experiences, I will help others better understand their own application process (Stanley, 2015). According to Ellingson (2006), our ability to cope with choices and navigate them for self-improvement lies in our past experiences.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the meaning of experience is not a given but rather subject to interpretation (Haggis, 2002). Every individual experiences a shared event differently as they construct and reconstruct it differently. Therefore, it may be difficult to replicate the situations describes in this. In addition, the first author of this account was born in the era of China’s “One Child per Family,” and as the only child in the family, the author’s family concepts, values and even choices of life direction were inevitably influenced by the culture of that era. The imprint of the era is unique, but there are certain limitations. It may be different from the considerations and choices made by other Chinese youth not born under the policy, or contemporaneous youth in other countries when facing similar dilemmas. To limit the limitations, we can attempt to conduct comparison research in future studies, comparing the considerations and choices of youth living under different policies/eras or in different countries when confronted with similar dilemmas. It would also be possible to conduct a more complete mid/long-term integrated observation or investigation, tracking from the doctoral application stage to the doctoral graduation stage, exploring the self-reflective journey of an individual’s engagement with family, work, and life during this period, and uncovering what it means to grow and develop as an individual. This self-narrated and situational re-enactment-based autoethnography could serve as a guide for others who are facing a similar predicament and pave the way to establishing a balance between individual choices, work, and familial responsibilities.

As I once posted on WeChat moments:

“The road ahead may be long with numerous alternatives but don’t be afraid to keep moving forward.”

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests: The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding: The author(s) has not received any financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Author contributions: **Qing Xu:** Conceptualization; Data curation; Writing-Original Draft; **Kei Wei Chia:** Mentorship; Reviewing and Correcting.

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Article Citation

Xu, Q., & Chia, K. W. (2024). How I obtained my PhD admission letter: A reflective interaction-based autoethnography. *The Qualitative Report*, 29(2), 502-515. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2024.6380>
