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Teacher, Model, Father: An Autoethnography of Long-Term Mentoring Between a Male Teacher and a Male Student

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Abstract
This autoethnography offered an opportunity to have an open conversation to explore the nature of the long-term relationship with my mentor, Mr. Jiang, who has guided me to grow since I was a high school student. With confidence being a significant theme, our interaction has changed along with my growth from a boy to an independent adult man, a teacher, and now, a doctoral student. Feelings between us have been complicated and featured as puzzled, doubtful, hurt, happy, guilty, and moved. The nature of the relationship is challenging to define accurately, but it is similar to a father/son-like mutually beneficial mentoring relationship. Mr. Jiang grew as a teacher; I grew as a man. Thanks to this autoethnography, he said, “Sometimes it's destiny that two people meet and recognize each other. I have had so many students but have only met one Si.”

Keywords
father/son-like mentoring, growth, confidence, autoethnography, male

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This autoethnography offered an opportunity to have an open conversation to explore the nature of the long-term relationship with my mentor, Mr. Jiang, who has guided me to grow since I was a high school student. With confidence being a significant theme, our interaction has changed along with my growth from a boy to an independent adult man, a teacher, and now, a doctoral student. Feelings between us have been complicated and featured as puzzled, doubtful, hurt, happy, guilty, and moved. The nature of the relationship is challenging to define accurately, but it is similar to a father/son-like mutually beneficial mentoring relationship. Mr. Jiang grew as a teacher; I grew as a man. Thanks to this autoethnography, he said, “Sometimes it’s destiny that two people meet and recognize each other. I have had so many students but have only met one Si.”

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Introduction

I grew up in a small town in China. During high school, I hated myself for being too emotional and unconfident because of my dissatisfaction with my masculinity against the norm of “Big boys don’t cry” (Cunningham et al., 2020). I thought being emotional and highly thoughtful of the trivial issues in daily life was a symbol of weakness and something opposite to masculinity. Instead, what I hoped I could be was to meet the qualities of a man or a boy: being emotionally stable, showing no weakness, being aggressive, holding it together, and never losing face (Masters, 2015). I wanted to grow up as an adult man as soon as possible, like Mr. Jiang.

Mr. Jiang was my Chinese teacher during my high school time. In my eyes, he carried the qualities I wanted. I hoped to learn from him to become a mature, masculine, and strong man. Therefore, I asked him many questions about daily life and personality rather than subject matters. Even though Mr. Jiang always answered all my questions and had sincere conversations, I did not feel he recognized me during high school. Instead, I thought he was trying to be friendly and polite, which I did not know why, and I felt puzzled. However, I felt we were more connected once I was not a student in his Chinese course. This change happened when our professional relationship as teacher and student ended and was replaced by a personal relationship. Bernstein-Yamashiro and Noam (2013) suggested that teachers must carefully establish and maintain clear boundaries in their student interactions. Although closeness between teacher and student would benefit from collegiality, appropriate professional boundaries are crucial. Excessive closeness may compromise teachers’ objectivity and fairness, and students may feel intimidated to express concern because of having lower power in the relationship (Plaut & Baker, 2011). Therefore, Mr. Jiang intentionally avoided me when I asked questions beyond the subject matter and hoped to gain more personal connection. In my memory, I hoped to have more conversations and connections with him during high school,
primarily to seek mentoring and guidance to grow into a man. However, as a high school student, I did not know about professional boundaries; I only knew I needed help and attention.

After I graduated from high school, we had more interactions and developed a long-term relationship that was themed on mentoring me to be a man. Mentoring is a relationship (Inzer & Crawford, 2005) through which the mentor helps the mentee’s growth in subject knowledge, personal development, and decision-making (Zachary, 2002). Moreover, mentoring could be formal or informal (Desimone et al., 2014; Holt et al., 2016). Inzer and Crawford (2005) suggested that informal mentoring is the natural coming together of a mentor and a mentee through personal and professional mutual respect and admiration, which usually becomes a long-term relationship. Therefore, the mentoring relationship between Mr. Jiang and me has aligned with informal mentoring since its beginning in high school. However, we also had formal mentoring from the end of March to the middle of May of 2013, when I was a senior in college and came back to my Alma Mater high school and had my student teaching with Mr. Jiang. The student teaching experience significantly influenced our mentoring relationship and acted as a pivot point, during which I became his formal mentee, a student teacher under his supervision.

That said, as shown in Figure 1, our relationship is close to an informal and formal mentoring relationship that was themed by masculinity and influenced by teacher-student professional distance. However, after all these years, I have never profoundly and systematically examined why and how we developed the mentoring relationship, nor did I define its nature. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the current literature has discussed all the major influences of our relationship, we are not likely to be alone, and a deeper exploration of our relationship would benefit the discussion and understanding of how perception of masculinity and professional boundary would influence male teachers to formally and formally mentor male students.

**Figure 1**

*Influences of the Relationship between Mr. Jiang and Si*

In this autoethnography, I prioritize exploring the nature and development of our mentoring relationship through the perspective of the formation, the development, and the nature of the relationship. I use autoethnographic methods to explore the following research questions: (a) Why did I choose Mr. Jiang as my mentor? (b) How did Mr. Jiang and I develop this long-term mentoring relationship? (c) What is the nature of the mentoring relationship between Mr. Jiang and me?
Methods

To examine the complex nature of the relationship, I use autoethnography as the methodology for two significant reasons. First, autoethnography is suitable for exploring deep feelings. Autoethnographers use first-person voices to write, expose themselves as vulnerable, and reflect and resist cultural interpretations (Ellis, 2004). That is why autoethnography is a method for conducting and displaying research (Vasconcelos, 2011). To give voice to personal experience to advance sociological understanding (Wall, 2008), autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of academic writing in which the author shares and deeply reflects on lived experience by connecting to multiple issues, including self-identity, emotions, and values (Poulos, 2013, 2021). Adams et al. (2015) also mentioned that autoethnography values an author’s relationships with others, which suits the context of my relationship with Mr. Jiang.

Second, as a research study, autoethnography served as my excuse to request an open-hearted conversation with Mr. Jiang, who might also need a formal invitation to feel more comfortable sharing deep thoughts about us. Both being males, Mr. Jiang and I have barely talked about “us” in the past. However, during the research interview for this autoethnography, we both opened to each other, which helped to answer the research question and, more importantly, strengthened our relationship. Moreover, this autoethnography allowed me to recognize myself as a person with significant life experience and a thinker with the power to understand myself and others.

Field Notebook Entries

Writing field notebook entries is a primary working process in autoethnography research. Autoethnographers use writing as a primary method of reflection and inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Before I wrote, I collected artifacts such as pictures I took with my phone, posts from my social media account, and greeting cards from students during my student teaching. Writing helped me calm down and think deeply during the journaling process, and I gained more profound thoughts. But sometimes, it was not easy to develop deep reflections when I sat down and wanted to write a journal entry for pages. Therefore, I wrote in a more flexible and relaxed way. I kept short notes on my cellphone or paper notebook whenever I came up with an idea. I had many thoughts coming when I was brushing my teeth or cooking. While writing, I have also searched and read extant literature on gender, masculinity, and mentoring to help me deeply explore my research questions.

Interviews

The only person I interviewed was Mr. Jiang. I applied and received institutional review board approval but waited for weeks before the interview as we never discussed ourselves. At first, I thought video recording would be helpful for later reflection, so I asked and received Mr. Jiang’s permission and conducted our interview on “Tencent Meeting,” a tool like Zoom that is better utilized in China. In our first video interview, I was trying to introduce my study and about to ask questions, when he smiled and stopped me, saying, “I cannot recall all the memories and generate the language right now; I need time to think about them. Would you send me an introduction with questions, and I will get back to you when I am ready?” I was initially surprised but understood his request because his reaction signaled that our relationship also meant a lot to him. He took it seriously and probably knew I would ask about his feelings about our relationship, which he had barely shared in the past. So, I considered that he might need time to bring back memories, organize his language, and say those things in the most “comfortable but still masculine” way.
Among many kinds of interviews in autoethnographic research, I wanted to use the most comfortable way to allow Mr. Jiang to share his vulnerable thoughts. Therefore, my interview with Mr. Jiang was close to the notion of interactive interviewing (Ellis, 2004), in which the researcher and participant exchange personal experiences, and tell or write their stories in the context of their relationship (Adams et al., 2015). Right after the first video interview, I wrote and sent him a formal document in Chinese just for him to introduce: what is autoethnography; the background of this autoethnography; why I have chosen the focus; what I want to know; the issues/questions for our first talking, and some artifacts to help him to reflect. I also shared the questions I would ask him about his impression and feeling of me as a person, my change through time, and my influence on the students and him. I also left a note to express my determination to conduct this research and my understanding that the interview might require both of us to be emotional and vulnerable. He replied, “Received,” and sent me pictures of students and me during my student teaching from his online albums. I was surprised that he had kept those pictures.

One week later, he contacted me, and we had our second video interview, in which he shared a lot that I had never known. Being emotional by recalling the memories and learning his perspectives I barely knew before, I felt I missed him and missed home for days after the interview.

Manuscript

Writing is an essential component and method of autoethnographic research since autoethnographers use active writing “to reach into research questions in ways that other methods cannot” (Poulos, 2021, p. 32). Besides writing field note entries, I see the research manuscript as another layer of writing, aiming at extracting and crystalizing the initial thoughts generated in field notes and interviews. For instance, while deriving the study results, I read my field notebook and made a table listing each journal entry’s central themes and the themes generated in the interview transcripts. Then, I picked the relevant themes for each of my research questions and wrote down the keywords of the themes on paper. Finally, I analyzed and sequenced the relationship between the themes belonging to each research question. Next, I picked the most typical stories from my journal entries to build the body of the manuscript and addressed the literature, which helped me understand my findings better.

Research Question 1: Choosing Mr. Jiang as My Mentor

Mr. Jiang and I have known each other since 2006, but I have never thought about why and how we developed this relationship until now. I think I was the one who walked to him, but I wondered what made me want to have a mentor; why did I want him to be my mentor, and why didn’t I ask other teachers or seniors to be my mentor? This section will discuss what I found regarding these questions.

My Family and Personality

When I was nine years old, the company in which my father worked was dismissed, and he left home for a small-scale business to make a living and traveled around the whole country. Since then, I have barely lived with him for more than two months each year. I talked and smiled less but thought and puzzled more. At 12, I attended a junior middle school downtown, too far away from my home to commute daily. So, I left home that year and lived with my aunt, my father’s sister. That was my first time living away from home, and I knew I
should behave like a good child living in a relative’s house. My aunt and her family were nice to me, but I became more sensitive and afraid of being disliked.

Biller (1970) suggested that father’s absence would influence boy’s personality development, which happened to me. As mentioned earlier, I was sensitive and worried a lot; I also became timid because of a lack of security. I did not have a father getting my back. I doubted my ability and if others liked me. I was uncomfortable with being doubtful and insecure and wanted to grow up as a young man as soon as possible to become the man who protects myself and my family. In the meantime, the only way to emerge stronger, in my understanding, was to study hard, get good grades, and then get admitted to a good university.

A Male Role Model Emerged

In the spring semester of 2006, Mr. Jiang became the Chinese teacher in my class. He taught Chinese language and literature, a core subject. He was a 27-year-old young man, teacher, husband, father, and a top university graduate. His class was engaging, and we discussed authors’ feelings on life in literature works. He cared about his students and smiled a lot inside and outside class. At that time, he was my favorite teacher and the first person I would consult on my puzzles about life. I saw a role model: a man who already had a wonderful family and a respected career, a teacher whom students welcomed, and a strong man who protected his family. I wanted to be like him, and the sooner, the better. I also wanted to be a teacher like him.

An Available Mentor

Unlike some classmates whose idols were celebrities who were out of reach, I was happy that a role model was available in my daily life. I remember that nearly everyone in our class liked him very much, boys, girls, low-graders, top-graders, athletic students, fine arts students, and students who disliked the Chinese subject. And we did not have many young teachers, which made him more popular. Therefore, I expected to see him in each Chinese class, and I volunteered as the Chinese subject student representative, helping the teacher collect and return homework. This allowed me to get more chances to meet him and seek mentoring. I wished he was my uncle or big brother. Then, getting attention and guidance from him would be easier. I also understood later that taking too much of his time was not good, as he had many students and should treat everyone equally. So, while I meticulously asked him for guidance, I feared he would get sick of me. My experience aligns with current literature, which suggests that young male teachers play essential roles in mentoring teenage boys (Odih, 2002; Wilson et al., 2014). In the exploration of masculinity and growth, young male teachers are role models in adolescent boys’ daily school lives.

Differences VS Similarities

I have always believed that my appreciation of Mr. Jiang was because what he had was what I did not have but wanted. In my mind, he was strong, brave, and confident, but I was the opposite in my opinion of myself, being gangly, timid, and unconfident. I hated my personality but wanted to have his. I believed our differences made me want to learn from him and become like him. However, in the second interview, he said, “No, on the contrary, we do have similarities. The similarities made you get close to me...” I did not understand it initially because it was too new for me. I was amazed and asked him to explain again, and he said:
Haven’t you noticed that I am also a sensitive male? I have sensitive feelings. I feel and talk about delicate and small feelings. In fact, I think my feelings are more delicate than many other males. You found me because you saw something similar in me. If I were a tuff guy without any sensitive emotions and did not talk about feelings at all, you would never walk close to me.

That was true and enlightening. I felt so happy to know the relationship was also rooted in similarities. Mitchell et al. (2015) suggested that perceived similarity is essential in mentor and mentee relationships. Neuwirth and Wahl (2017) also found that matching mentors and mentees who share more similarities would positively influence the mentoring program’s success.

**Research Question 2: Development of the Relationship**

As mentoring “is relational and developmental” (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021, p. 20), our relationship has changed over time and has been influenced by several significant aspects. This section tells how and what has affected our relationship.

**When I was His Student**

As mentioned earlier, Mr. Jiang was my Chinese teacher during high school. But we did not interact as much because I thought he tried to keep a distance from me. In fact, during high school, I always asked him questions. He never initially checked on me. He was always calm, not showing any emotion or attention towards me. I remember he once said, “I have to treat every one of my students equally; I cannot pay special attention to you.” So, I was hurt many, many times. I even hated myself for seeing him as a role model who was so cold. It was so hard for me to seek guidance and attention from him. But I also doubted myself – was I wrong to ask my teacher to mentor me? Was I adding too much pressure on him? Therefore, my relationship with him even added to my puzzles and pressure. Despite the difficulty, I firmly believed he had the qualities I wanted, like bravery and confidence. I wanted to become a man like him. So, I never gave up whenever he was cold to me; I continued to ask him questions because I knew he had to answer them anyway. I believed I might never make him like me as a student or person, but I received what I needed, which mattered more. Again, he was the “only available” role model then.

When conducting this autoethnography, I read literature to understand why Mr. Jiang kept a distance from me in high school. Then, I was enlightened and agreed that teachers or mentors should keep good boundaries since they have more power in the relationship (Campbell, 2007; Plaut & Baker, 2011). However, different professors have different preferences for professional distance with students; young faculty sometimes especially need to keep a formal relationship with students to clarify their roles (McKinsey, 2016). When I was Mr. Jiang’s student, developing mentorship in our teacher-student relationship was complicated and not easy.

**When I Was No Longer His Student**

I did not get a good grade in my first National College Entrance Examination to apply for my ideal college. Then I took a second year to prepare for the exam again, and Mr. Jiang was not my teacher anymore as I was studying on another campus in the second year. It was tremendous pressure that I took a second whole year to retake the exam. I could not focus or sleep well and felt tired when I woke up many mornings. One night, I called him to make an
appointment to meet because I felt hopeless when the exam date was fast approaching. But he said he was too busy to have an in-person meeting or a long phone call. I was sad and doubted his attitude towards me, as I have always doubted. That night, when I was so sure he did not care about me, I received a very long text message from him. I was surprised and read it very carefully and slowly. I did not want to finish reading. Here is part of what he said:

If you want to be like me, you should be super confident; you should believe you can do everything as I believe I can do everything. You should believe you can earn other people’s affection. You should believe you can overcome any problems by yourself, rather than seek strength from others. You should trust yourself!

Those words made me quiver. I was slightly trembling when reading his message as I was nervous, excited, and moved. “Earn other people’s affection” stuck out to me the most. I felt accepted and recognized. I felt the hurt I had was cured. I felt my puzzles had been cleared, which overshadowed the challenge. I then felt relaxed, relieved, and empowered to overcome the difficulties in my life. Later, when I recalled why that text message changed me and our relationship, I realized I could only really trust him if he made me feel accepted and recognized. He encouraged me to grow during high school during numerous conversations, but it never worked as powerfully as that text message. I named that text message “First Lesson for Life.” I became more patient and resilient. I did not contact him again for a long time after that. I read that text message again and again when I needed power. I kept that old cellphone I no longer used to keep that text message. And I thought I was stronger after that lonely and challenging time when I fought alone. After that, the occasional thought of, “I need to talk with Mr. Jiang…” became less frequent.

When I finished my second National College Entrance Examination, he texted me to ask me about my score and which school I was considering applying to show his care for my significant moment. That was the first time he initiated contact in my memory. Of course, I was thrilled. In the end, my performance on the second exam was not significantly improved, but I still felt happy, knowing I had tried my best and could start a new life in college. I have grown up a lot since I received Mr. Jiang’s empowering text message.

I attended a college that was far away from our home city. I still contacted Mr. Jiang for guidance, but only once or twice a year during college. For instance, I called him to talk about “friendship.” He was patient, shared a lot with me, and said:

It’s OK! Friendship should be a comfortable thing for both. If you try too hard to be nice to a friend, it will cause pressure on your friend, who will feel guilty if they cannot return the same as you have. But don’t criticize yourself; you are so young, growing up, and you will be fine if ended up losing a friend. Let it go.

I felt his words not only asking me to be strong and solve the problem by myself as he always did, but he also listened to me, analyzed my problem, and encouraged and assured me. I felt those words were powerful. His text message during exam preparation and this lesson were two unforgettable mentoring moments I had since I was not in his class anymore. I also sent my greetings for important festivals by text messages and visited him in person during some winter and summer breaks in my undergraduate years. But I contacted him less and less as I grew.
A Return to Mr. Jiang for Student Teaching

In March 2013, I was accepted into the master’s program of the English Department at a top university in China. Therefore, I made a significant step towards my goal: to be an English as a second language teacher in China. With student teaching not being a requirement of my undergraduate program, I still wanted to have the experience as preparation for my future career. I called Mr. Jiang to share the great news and asked if I could return to my high school to have my student teaching with him. He said, “Sure.” So, I took a train back home the next day and started my student teaching, one of the most unforgettable and significant periods in our long-term relationship, during which we were formal mentor and mentee for student teaching.

My student teaching lasted one month and a half. Mr. Jiang designed the basic plan for me. He let me work with him to learn and practice the role of “class advisor,” a general position in K-12 schools in China, and worked with the English subject teacher to learn English language teaching at the high school level. When I opened my student teaching album, there were many pictures, including selfies taken while working at my desk in the school office. The selfies surprised and slightly embarrassed me upon opening. But I realize the selfies are evidence that I did enjoy the time and appreciated myself to a certain degree during my student teaching.

Among many memorable moments, the first night of my student teaching was the most impressive. I went to the class with Mr. Jiang to meet the students. The students noticed that someone arrived with their class advisor. They were looking at me, talking to each other, and smiling. When Mr. Jiang introduced me, I had many thoughts and emotions in my mind. Even though that classroom was not precisely the one I had in my high school time, it looked the same. It was my first time back in my alma mater. But this time, I was not a student anymore but a teacher. Mr. Jiang called me “Chen Laoshi,” which meant Mr. Chen, in front of the class. I was more than happy; it sounded like he acknowledged that I had grown up. He introduced me as an undergraduate senior admitted to the master’s program at one of the best universities for teacher education in China. The students were cheering and looking at me like I was their role model. Their warm welcome made me feel I was another Mr. Jiang for them.

Mr. Jiang and I worked together for hours each day during my stay. I met with him to talk about students’ performance and well-being, make lesson plans, and ask questions about being a teacher. We had many conversations after dinner when we usually walked around the pond on campus. Once, he said:

You should be more confident, the worries you have been talking about are not that destructive when you believe you can overcome, and you see, you did overcome many problems already. Many teachers and students like you and speak highly of you. You can do anything you want in the future.

These words impressed me as he complimented me in detail on many aspects I have wanted to hear from him since high school. When I finished my student teaching, I wrote a greeting card to each student who also wrote a card to me which I did not know earlier. Many students called me “big brother” in their notes. I was recognized by myself, my students, my family, and especially Mr. Jiang. I felt I had grown up to be a man and a teacher. I enjoyed officially being a mentee and even a colleague to Mr. Jiang. And I was more motivated to become a teacher in the future.
After Student Teaching

I contacted Mr. Jiang even less after my student teaching as I could deal with more challenges alone. I only reached out to share significant updates and try not to disturb him. I became an English teacher in a college after receiving my master’s degree. I significantly benefited from my student teaching experience since I did not feel unconfident or nervous as a brand-new teacher. Instead, I enjoyed teaching and mentoring students. I felt sure that I loved working in education. I saw myself in my students. I wanted to learn, practice, and research how to help students learn and grow better. In this sense, I was trying to become Mr. Jiang. Or, I had already become Mr. Jiang.

I also understood better from my teaching experience why Mr. Jiang kept a distance from me during my high school years. As a new teacher, I also kept a distance from my students to maintain professional boundary (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013). I was only several years older than my students, which made me feel I should be strict and cool to earn their respect and awe. Then, I could better understand that Mr. Jiang might have handled it similarly. Therefore, it seems that once the constraints of the student-teacher dynamic were removed, Mr. Jiang and I found greater enjoyment in our relationship, liberated from the pressure to maintain a strictly professional distance.

Fly by Himself

My interviews with Mr. Jiang for this autoethnography have significantly benefited me with many new thoughts. Mr. Jiang shared in the interview that he had complicated feelings when I was back for student teaching. He felt happy to have a student who graduated years ago but was still coming back to him. He was moved since he knew I had many other options for student teaching, but I returned to be with him, rather than larger schools with more learning opportunities during student teaching. He also felt guilty, which he did not explain why initially. I was most surprised and interested in why he felt guilty, and I asked him multiple questions, if he could be more explicit or share more. In the end, he said, “An eagle may feel sad but has to push his kid down to the cliff to learn how to fly by himself.”

He meant he was an adult eagle, and I was his child. His guilt was related to his previously being cold, which puzzled me greatly for years, but he thought he had to teach me that way. Therefore, he was cold to me during my high school time not because he did not like me, but he thought he had to mentor me in that way. I felt healed a lot. As he said, he felt guilty, which meant he already knew I was hurt during high school. I always thought he never knew I was hurt. But he did. And that is why I did not understand why he said he was also sensitive, which perfectly explained how he felt and knew everything from the beginning, earlier than I could have realized. I never knew because he never shared.

Therefore, the interviews were highly helpful as we both showed vulnerability to each other. Masters (2015) shared that showing vulnerability and building emotional intimacy are highly challenging for many males. Therefore, I thought we were brave to openly share feelings for all these years during our conversation, though it was not easy, especially at the beginning of the conversation. He did not look at the screen but rather at his notes, especially when talking about emotional memories. And I was nervous and even slightly trembling when listening. But I guess he was happy to have this chance to talk about this the same as I did. He said multiple times, “I have not told you this before, but I tell you now because you have grown up.” It seemed that he had been waiting for this open-heart conservation.
Research Question 3: Nature of the Relationship

I have wanted but never successfully defined the relationship between Mr. Jiang and me before conducting this autoethnography. It is complicated and hard to be categorized with a single word. In the English language, “mentor” might be the closest word to describe the role of Mr. Jiang to me. But the nature may even be more complicated than “mentoring.”

“I Acted as Your Father.”

During the interview, after talking about my being unconfident because of father absence, Mr. Jiang said:

As your father was not with you, so you were looking for someone who could act as your father. And you thought I was not bad. So, you came to me. To a great extent, I acted as your father in the growth.

Therefore, in his mind, he has a clearer idea of the nature of our relationship. He thought “father” was closer to how he acted in this relationship. Another thing I noticed was that he thought he acted like a father because he remembered many details about my father. He said:

I remember right before your student teaching, you told me that your father had recommended an internship position in an agency for you in a big city, but you insisted on coming back for a student teaching with me. Your insistence on returning to me to this small city was a recognition for me and also meant you had a kind of emotional attachment to me. You were back because you wanted to be with me, no matter if you could learn something or not. I was moved deeply.

I was stunned that he remembered my father had recommended an internship position for me, which I had forgotten completely. He felt recognized as a father-like figure since I did not go to my father’s arrangement but returned to him. It occurred to me that he had occasionally asked me about my father in the past. He cared about my perceptions of my father. He wanted to know what was missing in the relationship between my father and me to better understand my need for guidance. So, he was learning to be my “father.” Moreover, it might be his journey of learning to be a father, not only to me but also to his daughter. During my student teaching, he mentioned saying the same thing to his daughter, a primary school student, and me, a college student. He hoped to encourage us to be more confident in trying new adventures without worrying about making mistakes.

Besides his role of being a “father” to me, our interaction seemed to be reciprocal. As the mentee, I was essential in starting and maintaining the relationship. Therefore, we both played prominent roles in this relationship, which was like the notion of coteaching (Roth, 1998), which means learning would take place through the learner’s co-participation in teaching to understand it (Roth et al., 2002); and the notion of cogenerative mentoring (Harris et al., 2009). Therefore, I initiated the mentorship and asked the questions I wanted to be able to grow.

Therefore, our relationship has been featured in or close to many categories, or even more to be discovered. First, we were teacher-student. Next, for most of the time, we had informal mentorship in which we engaged in spontaneous mentor-mentee interactions (Mullen, 2009; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). We enjoyed our informal mentorship (Gowdy et al., 2024; Ragins & Cotton, 1999), which is more intuitive, egalitarian, longer lasting, and brings more
positive outcomes since they participate voluntarily. However, we also had quality time and interaction during a period of formal mentoring when I became his formal mentee in my student teaching. The co-existence of informal and formal mentoring has boosted our connection and long-term relationship. Finally, from the content and emotions this mentorship showed, we thought we were like “father and son” by ourselves.

Mutually Beneficial Mentoring

Many studies identified the mutuality and reciprocity of mentoring relationships. Mentors benefit personally and reap intrinsic rewards by guiding their mentees (Lumpkin, 2011). Mentors also enjoy the happiness of passing knowledge and skills and the exhilaration of gaining new energy, different perspectives, loyalty, and support shown by their mentees (Allen, 2007; Allen et al., 1997). I have gained more than I had requested and expected from the mentoring relationship. I have grown up as an independent man with more competence and confidence to face challenges. I became a college teacher and have enjoyed teaching since 2016. Furthermore, I started my Ph.D. study in education in 2021. However, I have never asked Mr. Jiang if he has gained anything from our relationship. I asked him in the interview, and he shared:

A lot. A promising student who came all the way back to be with me was strong evidence that I was a great teacher. Your return was an excellent advertisement. Therefore, the students trusted my ability and excellence more than before. And students would work harder and have better academic performance when they trust their teachers. On the contrary, students may dislike studying if they dislike the teacher. Also, your growing-up experience was an inspirational story. A lively example worked better than telling significant theories to encourage the students to work harder.

He appreciated the power of recognition, trust, and serving as a model in education. My return was a recognition to him, which made him feel moved. He also shared:

It took more than ten years to guide you. It is a great devotion of time and emotion. It has been a huge challenge to make it continue for both of us. I enjoy exploring how to guide the students, especially those who require more effort. I bought books, I thought. And it is immense happiness when I know and help students better and be trusted. I need that for my career, for my life.

Mr. Jiang also shared that he rejected a job offer to work as a full-time educational researcher for the whole city because he could not leave the classroom. Instead, he had to be with students. When he mentored me, he grew up as a teacher. Finally, he said he had gained and enjoyed the relationship with me and was happy to see that I had grown up. In my five years of classroom teaching from 2016-2021, I wanted to meet a student like me and be a Mr. Jiang-like role for the student, since I wanted to return what I have benefited to students, and I also thought it would help me understand myself and my growth better. But I don’t think I’ve had that similar experience. I shared this with him, who said, “It is a natural thing. It wouldn’t necessarily come if you intentionally asked for it. Sometimes it’s destiny that two people meet and recognize each other. I have had so many students but have only met one Si.”
Conclusion

In conclusion, I agree with Mr. Jiang that our relationship is “father/son-like mentoring,” which is not necessarily strictly defined as it is still growing and developing. Moreover, mutual recognition and growth shaped this long-term father/son-like mentoring relationship, through which Mr. Jiang grew as a teacher, and I grew as a man.

I also hope our story could provide some implications or trigger more reflections among males with similar mentoring experiences or anyone interested in knowing more about the lives of such males. For example, how would the absence of a father influence a son’s confidence and growth in different contexts? In my case, a male mentor made up the role of a father who guided me growing up with an emphasis on building confidence. Multiple factors played a role in developing the mentoring relationship, including gender, professional relationship, vulnerability, and resilience. Future studies could explore how the factors act differently in other mentoring relationships. With that said, there are many worthwhile things to explore in individualized mentoring experiences, and more excellent mentors would change the lives of more mentees.

In closing, I want to thank Mr. Jiang, who is only 13 years older than me, but has been an excellent “father” to me all these years, for sharing his feelings in the interview, from which I learned what I wanted to know. Also, thank you, dear reader.

References

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