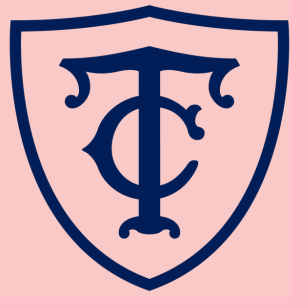


Decolonizing SEL Programs for Chinese Migrant Children: A Case Study of an Educational NGO in Shanghai

Yuqi Zheng (az2785@tc.columbia.edu),
Teachers College, Columbia University
Master’s Candidate in International Educational Development Program



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the poster:



1 Background

- Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs were introduced to China in 2011 (UNICEF, n.d.)
- Epistemic injustice in adapting SEL that centers Western knowledge and ways of thinking (Chan & Molyneux, 2023)
- Indigenization of SEL for Chinese migrant children remains underexplored

2 Research Questions

What are local Chinese practitioners’ experiences in SEL program indigenization for primary school migrant children in Shanghai?

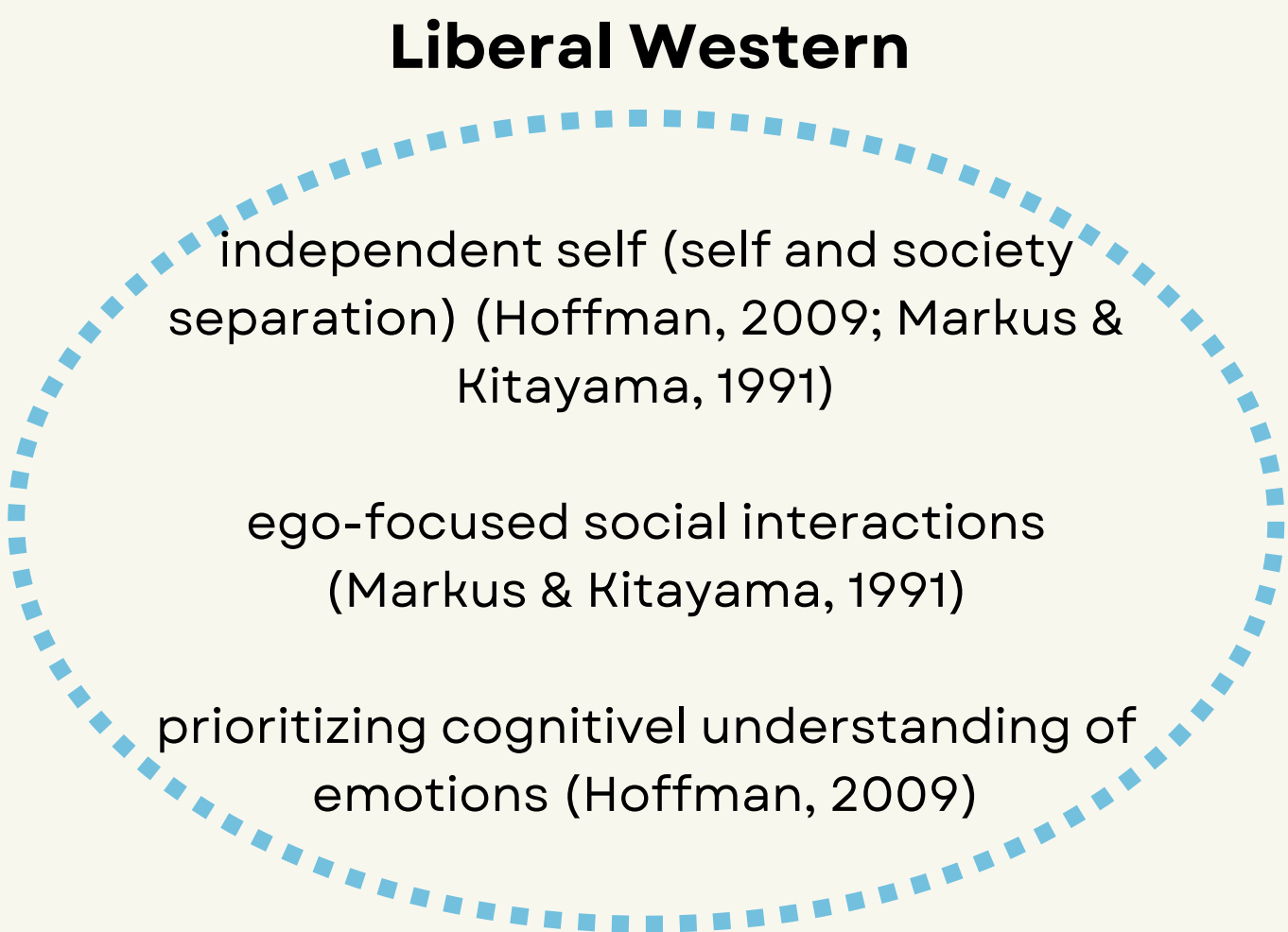
Specifically, how do local Chinese practitioners’ knowledge and practices challenge or reinforce the Western knowledge system in indigenizing the SEL program for migrant children?

3 Methodologies

- Case Studies Approach (Yin, 2018; Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017)
- Critical Paradigm
- Methods: Interview, Document Analysis
- Research Site: SS (a local educational NGO serving migrant children in Shanghai)
- Participants: 5 SS staff members, 6 SS SEL volunteer teachers

4 Theoretical Framework

Pluriverse: decentering Western knowledge system; alternative ways of thought from local experiences (Escobar, 2011; Reiter, 2018)



Traditional Chinese (Adapted from You’s (2023) theory)



***Translation (Indigenization): fluid and dialectic interaction between Western and local ways of thinking and doing (Ferguson, 2005; Henward et al., 2019; Trinh, 1991)**

5 Migrant Children Contexts

- **Socioeconomically Disadvantaged**
- **Structural Barriers to Education Access**
- **Educational Experiences Affected by Parental Constraints**
- **Fluctuating Life Circumstance**
- **Socio-culturally Detached**

Discipline Management: In-class Relationality Establishment

- Most practitioners adopted authoritative, rule-based discipline strategies, viewing disruptions as individual issues—practices rooted in both Chinese hierarchical traditions and Western cognitive-behavioral models.
- A few fostered emotional bonds and peer-like relationships with students, promoting voluntary engagement and emotional expression. These relational approaches align with Indigenous Chinese pedagogies, contrasting Euro-centric and Soviet-influenced authoritative models.

“[When students disrupt discipline] I may ask a student to recite the group rules, and if they can recite them, we can continue with the lesson.”

“I am kind to people in my life, and I will be the same in class. If you are a person who is particularly good at finding the good in others in your life, then you may bring your students an aspect of your true self...That authenticity will touch them, and then they will feel that this teacher is particularly good at finding the good in others. [Students might think] ‘I was so happy when she found my bright spots, so I might as well try to apply this practice to my life’.”

7 Conclusion & Future Prospects

Key Conclusions

- There is a notable gap between practitioners’ philosophical alignment with Indigenous Chinese thought and their actual classroom practices.
- This gap results in partial reinforcement of Western, cognitive-oriented SEL models despite intentions to localize content.

Future Directions

- Participatory/Action Research might be needed to support practitioners in turning their local, relational values into pedagogical reality.
- Greater integration of migrant children’s voices in curriculum design could enhance cultural relevance and effectiveness.
- Further research should explore the emotional labor and self-blame experienced by practitioners in under-resourced NGO settings.

6 Findings and Discussion

Topic Selection: Socio-Cultural Norm Considerations

- Practitioners selected or modified SEL topics based on compatibility with Chinese sociocultural norms, aiming to preserve intergenerational harmony.
- Lessons like “Stereotype” empowered migrant children to reflect critically on lived experiences, while topics promoting individualism were often excluded.
- These choices reflect Confucian and Daoist values of relationality and social harmony, challenging the individualistic orientation of Western SEL frameworks.

“I think the children have been very receptive [to the lesson on stereotypes], and we have mainly focused on gender stereotypes, as well as old and young, for example, that children feel less than adults. ... You could feel that the girls, in particular, were very inspired by the lesson.”

“In my opinion, in the Chinese context, especially with these children whose opinions are often not listened to, you can’t just hand this idea of ‘mutual respect’ over to them, let them go home, and say, ‘Mum, you’re going to start respecting me.’ You can’t do that because it may cause some unnecessary conflicts.”

Form of Class Activities: Learning through Experience

- The curriculum emphasized cognitive tasks and tended to prescriptively use formulaic frameworks (e.g., S.M.A.R.T.), often disconnected from students’ lived realities.
- This reinforces Eurocentric epistemologies, despite practitioners’ aspirations to make learning more socially grounded and culturally relevant.

“The students already understood emotions, and they know what ‘pause, think, and act means, and they understood it clearly, but they would say, ‘I can’t do it.’ [I think] their problem is that ‘I understand, but I can’t live my life well’... It’s very ineffective to reason with them like that according to the lesson plan. They won’t listen. You have to put them in the context, otherwise their attention won’t be on the class.”

“I think that SEL is about yourself and about society at the same time – they go hand in hand – because you have to be interested in society or in the world before you start trying to understand yourself.”



Definition of S.M.A.R.T. was shown on the class slide



Colorful Lollipop Activity

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