

Positionality as Method: Reflexive Engagement in Studying Transnational Filial Practices in Migration Research

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Abstract: This article stems from an ongoing doctoral project that investigates how Chinese immigrants in Portugal negotiate filial piety across borders. While the substantive focus concerns intergenerational care in transnational families, the primary contribution of this paper lies in its methodological reflection on researcher positionality and reflexivity. Drawing on twenty-five in-depth, semi-structured interviews and field notes conducted during 2023, I examine how my dual positioning – as a culturally familiar “insider” sharing Confucian values, language, and migration experiences, but also a socially distant “outsider” who is not part of the Zhejiang migrant community in Portugal – shaped every stage of the research process, from participants recruitment and rapport-building to interpretation and representation. Guided by frameworks of critical reflexivity and power relations, this study views positionality not as a bias to be controlled but as an analytical resource. By documenting moments of alignment, tension, and ambiguity in insider–outsider dynamics, the paper demonstrates how methodological transparency about the researcher’s embodied and affective stance can enrich, rather than compromise, qualitative inquiry into transnational family life. As such, it responds directly to emerging calls for more nuanced, ethically grounded approaches to studying intimacy and obligations across cultural and national boundaries.

Keywords: positionality, insider–outsider, reflexivity, filial piety, transnational families

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1. Introduction

Researcher positionality constitutes a critical, yet often under-examined, dimension of qualitative inquiry, particularly within the complex domain of migration studies (Berger, 2015). The researcher's social location – shaped by intersecting identities such as nationality, ethnicity, gender, class, and migration experience – not only influences access to participants but fundamentally impacts data collection, information comprehension, and knowledge production (Carling et al., 2014; Gurr et al., 2024).

This paper engages with this methodological imperative by critically examining my own positionality in an ethnographic study of transnational filial practices among Chinese immigrants in Portugal. Filial piety (Sun, 2017), a deeply rooted value in Chinese culture, traditionally emphasizes respect for parents, moral obligations, and obedience to parents' orders. While contemporary interpretations have incorporated ideals of mutual communication and more egalitarian parent–child relationships, hierarchical expectations and gendered norms associated with family responsibility continue to shape filial perceptions and behaviors. Investigating filial piety in a transnational context therefore presents a specific set of challenges that expose the limitations of conventional positional categories. While my shared cultural heritage might suggest a straightforward “insider” status for a researcher of Chinese origin, such an assumption risks essentializing a heterogeneous diaspora and overlooking crucial intra-group diversities (Ganga & Scott, 2006). Indeed, the ingrained binary in migration research that categorizes scholars simplistically as either “insiders” or “outsiders”, typically defined in ethnic or cultural terms, respectively referring to members of the studied population and members of the host country's mainstream group, fails to account for the dynamic, relational, and intersectional nature of positionality (Carling et al., 2014).

The study emerges from my doctoral research project, which explores how Chinese migrant families in Portugal navigate intergenerational care obligations across national borders. As a researcher who shares a linguistic and Confucian cultural background with the participants, but with different geographical origins within China and a distinct biographical trajectory, I occupied what Merriam et al. (2001) term a “negotiated” position. Rather than treating this ambiguous stance as a methodological limitation, I approached it as a source of analytical insight. During fieldwork interactions, I drew upon my cultural familiarity to build rapport and trust while remaining attentive to my regional and experiential differences to avoid presuming shared understanding.

Throughout the whole research process, I kept informal field notes and reflexive reflections on participant recruitment, interview interactions, and emerging interpretations. These records were not collected through a formal reflexive journaling procedure but served as prompts for critical self-examination, helping me identify how my assumptions, emotions, and social position influenced both the research encounter and subsequent analysis. This approach echoes Milligan's (2016) “in-betweenener” and Barnes' (2023) “liquid inbetweenener”. I propose that the tensions inherent in occupying a simultaneously insider and outsider position can be produc-

tively mobilized through reflexive engagements to deepen understanding and enhance the credibility of the research process.

The primary objective, therefore, is not merely to report on migrants' filial attitudes but to demonstrate how a reflexive engagement with one's own positionality can function as a core methodological approach in studying intimate, culturally situated practices in transnational contexts.

This paper is structured as follows. The first part offers critical reflections on positionality and reflexivity, examining how the researcher's situated identity shaped fieldwork encounters, knowledge production, and interpretation of empirical material. It is then followed by the methodological orientation, outlining the research design, access to participants, and the data collection process. The analytical section shows how positionality was enacted in practice through participant recruitment, interview interactions, and evolving power relations, as well as the co-constructed nature of researcher–researched relationships. These analyses draw primarily on semi-structured interview transcripts, complemented by reflexive insights from my field diary. The paper concludes with a discussion of the broader methodological implications of studying filial piety within Chinese transnational families.

2. Positionality and reflexivity

The concepts of positionality and reflexivity are central to contemporary debates on rigor and ethics in qualitative research. Positionality refers to the researcher's social and cultural identity and standpoint, which inevitably informs their perspective on the world and their interactions in the field (Berger, 2015). Traditional discussions often frame the researcher's role as a choice of being an “insider” or an “outsider”. Insiders are credited with privileged access, linguistic fluency, and an intuitive grasp of implicit cultural norms; however, they may struggle with objectivity and the challenge of identifying taken-for-granted assumptions (Unluer, 2012). Outsiders, conversely, may offer a more detached analytical perspective but risk misinterpreting the context and may face barriers when it comes to building trust (Merton, 1972).

The insider–outsider dichotomy has increasingly drawn criticism for being overly simplistic and static. Scholars like Hellowell (2006) argue that researchers typically occupy shifting positions along an insider–outsider continuum, and it is precisely the critical engagement with this dynamism that fosters methodological reflexivity. This perspective moves beyond viewing positionality as a fixed label and towards understanding it as a relational process co-constructed through interactions with participants (Ganga & Scott, 2006). It is evident that reflexivity – defined as the ongoing critical self-awareness of how the researcher's presence, assumptions, and emotions shape the research – is not a dispensable add-on but a fundamental strategy for generating credible knowledge (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

In the context of this study, my positionality was multifaceted and non-static. I disclosed my identity as a Chinese national from northern China, educated in

a tradition that emphasizes filial piety, which provided a foundational cultural common ground with participants. At the same time, my status as a doctoral student, my specific regional background (distinct from the dominant Zhejiang¹ community in Portugal), and my relatively short duration of residence in Portugal meant I was simultaneously an outsider to their particular social networks and lived experiences of migration. This complex positioning directly influenced the research process. For instance, my identity as doctoral student set me apart within Zhejiang migrants' social network, the majority of whom run family businesses and do not hold a Bachelor's degree or above. Consequently, I was viewed as a stranger to their community who was unfamiliar with the realities of their life. Within this context, being questioned about their filial practices by someone from outside their community aroused fears of "losing face", particularly the fear that their behaviors might be misinterpreted as unfilial.

Therefore, this research adopted an ongoing reflexive approach, applied throughout the process from participant recruitment and interviewing to data analysis (Charmaz, 2014). This process was guided by the core question: How does my specific positionality as a "cultural insider yet social outsider" actively shape the knowledge being co-produced in this study? By continuously identifying this question, reflexivity became the method through which the potential biases and blind spots associated with my dual status were identified, negotiated, and transformed into a source of analytical depth, aligning with the view that positionality itself can be a powerful heuristic tool (Hellawell, 2006) for qualitative research.

3. Method

Research design

Qualitative research inherently involves the researcher's subjective engagement, making positionality a critical factor that influences data collection depth, analytical framework construction, and the generalizability of conclusions (Gurr et al., 2024). Through positional reflection, researchers can identify and correct cognitive blind spots, thereby enhancing the credibility of their findings. As Berger (2015) noted, recruiting participants is time-consuming and requires significant effort to build trust and rapport. This study leverages both insider and outsider roles in participant access, aiming to understand participants' contexts and manage relationships effectively.

This paper draws from my doctoral project, initiated in 2021, focusing on Chinese communities in Portugal. The primary objective is to explore how Chinese migrants perceive filial obligations and manage caregiving responsibilities across national borders.

1 My home city is located in northern China, where a deep-rooted filial culture is dominant, in contrast to Zhejiang, which is situated in the southern China. For example, family from northern China traditionally emphasizes patriarchy authority, distinct gender roles, and an individual son's accountability in the practice of filial obligation.

Participants were asked about their views on filial piety, methods of maintaining contact with aging parents, and practices they undertake to fulfill filial duties.

Recruitment began online in 2023 using snowball sampling, aiming at a diverse range of participants based on age, gender, educational background, professional experience, and marital status. My “professional image” as a doctoral student at a university and cultural background of growing up in a region where filial piety is deeply ingrained were anticipated to facilitate rapport and encourage participants to share diverse experiences regarding care for the aged. It was also anticipated that each participant would offer unique insights into how Portuguese culture influences traditional filial values. Employing a reflexive position throughout the research process aligns with Charmaz’s (2014) emphasis on being aware of one’s presuppositions and considering how preconceived ideas may influence research.

Snowball sampling can play a crucial role in recruitment as it is based on participants’ social networks. Another key feature was addressing concerns about anonymity: ensuring confidentiality was central to alleviating fears of data exposure (Yip, 2024). Data were collected through in-depth interviews, which involved navigating complex negotiations about the research agenda, relevant knowledge, and shifts in power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee. Interviewees discussed sensitive topics such as parent–child relationships, feelings of guilt, and communication frequency post-migration. Interviews were recorded using mobile devices and stored under pseudonyms. Reflexive insights presented in this paper were derived from the recruitment procedure, field notes, question formulation, and interview interactions that help to track emerging themes, relationships, and potential biases, ensuring the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings (Charmaz, 2014).

Self-examination

The disclosure of my positionality throughout the research process exemplifies a practice of reflexivity, motivating me to continually ask: How does my positionality influence the research process, and what are its effects on the results? In qualitative research, uncovering a researcher’s position should encompass multiple markers beyond nationality or ethnicity, including name, occupation, gender, age, appearance, clothing, parenthood, language proficiency, cultural competence, commitment, religion, and migration experiences (Carling et al., 2014).

I am a Chinese student from northern China who completed a Master’s degree in 2021 and subsequently started a doctoral program in Portugal. My parents are retired and reside in China. Growing up in a region that honors hierarchy, filial piety has been central to my moral education. Living in Portugal introduced me to the Zhejiang ethnic community. This is my fifth year in Portugal, during which cross-cultural interactions with students from other continents have presented significant cultural conflicts against my initial educational experiences.

Sharing similar immigrant experiences with participants positions me as an insider due to our common Chinese culture and history, as well as our migrant status in

Portugal. Initially, I assumed this would naturally reduce barriers, foster trust and facilitate deeper information sharing. Nevertheless, challenges became increasingly evident throughout the process. For instance, my “professional” image did not significantly aid in recruitment, and I underestimated how my identity and prior knowledge could influence the interpretation of responses. Adjustments to questioning methods were necessary after interviewing several participants, when I noticed participants began to constantly offer socially desirable responses in place of expressing genuine feelings, suggesting that performative compliance had been triggered by face-saving concerns.

Holmes (2020) emphasized that junior researchers should be mindful of their positionality and strive for reflexivity to uncover the “true voice” behind participants’ stories. Reflexivity does not mean eliminating subjectivity but rather acknowledging its presence and understanding the advantages and limitations of both emic and etic perspectives. Recognizing that the reflexive process requires time and does not guarantee high-quality research underscores the importance of ongoing self-examination (Holmes, 2020).

4. Positionality in action

a) Gaining access to participants

The process of participant recruitment serves as the first and most revealing site where researcher positionality is mediated and implemented. My initial research design aimed to recruit a diverse sample of fifty Chinese individuals in Portugal, encompassing both those born and raised in Portugal and those who migrated after reaching adulthood. Recognizing the heterogeneity within the diaspora, I sought to account for variations in geographical origin (e.g., northern vs. southern China), profession, socio-economic status, linguistic fluency, educational attainment, gender, and age (Bukamal, 2022). Given my dual identity as a fellow Chinese immigrant and a doctoral student, I anticipated that my “insider” status would streamline recruitment, fostering immediate rapport and trust.

This expectation, however, was quickly challenged by the complex realities of fieldwork. Recruitment proved far more arduous than planned. Initial efforts on RedNote, a popular Chinese social media platform, yielded limited success; several potential participants explicitly declined, citing a general aversion to participating in academic research about Chinese communities or expressing discomfort at the prospect of discussing personal matters with a stranger. In-person invitations, facilitated through my personal network, also faced significant hurdles. While some individuals expressed interest, others deemed family-related topics too sensitive for discussion, and three potential candidates were ultimately excluded for not meeting the study’s selection criteria.

These early setbacks forced a critical reassessment of my assumptions. I had presumed that a shared culture and migrant experience constituted a stable, tangible “insider” status that would grant me automatic access (Ganga & Scott, 2006). In practice,

this label held little weight for many potential participants. This experience resonated strongly with Ganga and Scott's (2006) finding that their own national identity did not guarantee insider status among co-ethnic migrants whose life trajectories differed significantly from their own. Similarly, my position was not fixed but was actively interpreted and redefined by the participants themselves, a dynamic that proved far more consequential than my self-perception (Milligan, 2016).

Snowball sampling, relying heavily on my existing acquaintances, became the primary recruitment strategy. Its effectiveness was directly linked to the Chinese cultural concept of *guanxi*: the intricate web of social connections and reciprocal obligations that governs interpersonal relationships (Santos Neves & Rocha-Trindade, 2008). For participants within my extended social circle, my status as a trusted connection facilitated their willingness to engage. Yet, this very mechanism also highlighted the limitations of my reach. The method's success depended on participants' own social capital and their willingness to support me, which was not universally applied.

Crucially, my positionality shifted dramatically depending on the specific subgroup I approached. My northern Chinese background created an unexpected distance when engaging with the dominant Zhejiang community in Portugal. To them, I was not a cultural insider but an outsider from a different regional and cultural context within China.

Requests for interviews with participants from southern provinces such as Zhejiang, Fujian, or Guangdong required a multi-step approach. Initial contact was often met with heightened concerns about data confidentiality and anonymity. Furthermore, my unfamiliarity with participants' specific local customs and dialects meant I could not assume a shared understanding of filial piety. I frequently had to provide detailed explanations of the research's purpose and the concept itself, a process that demanded patience and multiple rounds of communication before trust was established and participation agreed upon.

I found that some participants from southern China did not recognize the academic definition of filial piety when I first approach them. Rather than insisting on predefined terminology, I adopted a fluid methodological standpoint: I avoided using sociological jargon and offered concrete examples. For example, participants were asked about how they arranged intergenerational care during migration, their opinions on home-based care versus formal institutional care such as nursing homes, and whether they prioritized financial support or emotional comfort in fulfilling filial obligations. To relieve emotional burdens and avoid face-to-face embarrassment, voice-call interviews were offered as an alternative. However, although this format reduced participant discomfort, it limited my ability to observe and sense participants' emotions, which would have been more accessible through in-person interviews.

This approach mirrors Sloane's (2026) findings that when the western framework around gender-based violence was suspended, participants were allowed to reframe issues through indigenous idioms of "family conflict" or "men-women relations" instead. Fluidity demanded that I treat conceptual misalignment as an ethical

imperative for renegotiation rather than a barrier to be overcome. My positionality thus became a site of active knowledge production, transferring filial piety from a fixed category to a relationally emergent phenomenon.

The change in positionality from being a trusted connection within one network to a distant stranger in another underscores identity's relational and context-dependent nature. This aligns with the insight from Yip's (2024) study on Asian immigrant teachers, where the assumption of a monolithic "Asian" identity collapsed upon contact with participants who identified primarily with their specific national or ethnic backgrounds. In my case, the pan-Chinese identity I assumed was similarly deconstructed by regional distinctions.

Moreover, being a cultural insider presented a unique paradox. While it offered a foundation for understanding, it also introduced barriers that an outsider might not face. As Katyal and King (2014) observed in their work, non-Chinese researchers sometimes found participants more willing to discuss sensitive issues precisely because their "foreigner" status removed the risk of judgment from within the community. My situation was the opposite. One potential participant explicitly declined, fearing the "loss of face" (*diu mian zi*) associated with admitting to perceived failures in filial duty, specifically the inability to provide physical care or spend sufficient time with aging parents (Baldassar, 2015). The shared cultural framework, rather than facilitating openness, amplified the social stakes of participation.

Considering these experiences, I adopted Ganga and Scott's (2006) methodological reorientation: instead of trying to move "across" the researcher-participant divide by asserting my insider credentials, I learned to move "along" it. This meant embracing the moments of misalignment – not as failures but as valuable data points. A participant's hesitation, a request for clarification, or a refusal to discuss a topic became opportunities for reflexive inquiry into how my own assumptions, questions, and very presence were shaping the interaction. Ultimately, gaining access was not a one-time achievement based on a static identity but an ongoing, negotiated process that revealed the profound complexity of positionality in transnational research.

b) Positionality and power relations

Although an "outsider" position can offer a degree of objectivity in examining filial piety, it simultaneously widens the relational gap between the researcher and the researched, a dynamic particularly evident in interviews with individuals from southern China and those who maintain intensely close or conflicted relationships with their parents.

This tension was evident during my initial interview with Participant L, a woman from Zhejiang province. The conversation began with marked hesitation. I could sense her hesitation at the beginning of the conversation, as she replied to my questions with only a few words or phrases. In an effort to bridge this distance, I kept clarifying questions and offered contextual examples to signal my genuine attempt to understand her lived reality. Gradually, she became increasingly willing to share

her candid reflections on the emotional and practical challenges of fulfilling transnational filial obligations. However, my early reactions, shaped by surprise or empathetic intensity, unintentionally conveyed judgment. At some points, sensing my emotional response, she paused and said, “You may not understand my situation.”

When discussing topics that were not personally familiar to me, I refrained from imposing my own experiences as the primary frame of reference for interpreting participants’ narratives (Yip, 2024). This fundamentally transformed our relational dynamic. Rather than filtering her experience through my own perspective, I committed to becoming a careful listener: attentive, nonjudgmental, and attuned to the subtle nuances of her story.

As an “outsider” researcher, I found that appropriately sharing aspects of my own experience could help participants gradually lower their guard, thereby facilitating access to innovative insights (Milligan, 2016) that might remain inaccessible to those with insider status.

Establishing contact with participant A proved to be a particularly revealing encounter. She was the first one to explicitly reject my interview request, declining to discuss family relations that had caused her profound emotional harm. Our conversation commenced cautiously, centered on her migration experience. As the dialogue deepened, I identified an entry point to bridge the gap: we were significantly influenced by patriarchal norms emphasizing “son preference”. My disclosure of personal entanglement with this structure prompted her to share details I might have overlooked. She repeatedly highlighted, “you could understand my feelings... It is wrong to do that ...”

Throughout this process, I consciously shifted the power dynamic from occupying a position of authority to functioning as a collaborative partner. That said, it remains crucial for the researcher to stay vigilant against potential digressions, particularly when participants misinterpret an invitation to share a “free and random narrative” as permission to dominate the conversation. Maintaining gentle but clear control over the interview’s rhythm and direction must remain a top priority.

Furthermore, the power relation was never static but was constantly reshaped by intersecting factors of identity, including gender, age, and socio-economic status. As a relatively young female researcher, my fieldwork was shaped by gendered expectations of epistemic authority whereby older male participants occasionally positioned themselves as legitimate interpreters of both my questions and my research design. This resonates with feminist methodological critiques that conceptualize the interview not as a neutral data collection method but as a situated and relational encounter in which knowledge is co-produced through asymmetrical social positions (England, 1994; Rose, 1997).

Power relations were not confined to rapport-building and conversational dynamics. They were also structured by broader social hierarchies such as gender, class, and professional status. An interview with a successful male CEO highlighted how gender intersected with forms of social, economic, and cultural capital. He frequently interrupted my questions to “rephrase” them according to his own

understanding, effectively taking control of the interview's direction. This act of rephrasing can be explained as an exertion of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991), wherein he felt that his institutionalized cultural capital authorized him to impose the legitimate form of questioning, thereby converting his professional authority into authority over what counts as valid knowledge in the interview field. He offered unsolicited advice on my research design, some of which was indeed insightful, but other suggestions felt patronizing and reflected his accustomed position of authority in professional settings. This interaction forced me to reflect critically: "Am I being positioned as inferior in this dialogue merely due to his social status?" Navigating this required a delicate balance, acknowledging his expertise while gently reasserting my methodological autonomy. This negotiation reveals the interview as a contested micro-field where competing habitus collide: his disposition toward managerial authority encountered my embodied researcher habitus, making the interactional hierarchy not a fixed outcome of capital possession but a site of ongoing struggle over the rules of exchange (Bourdieu, 1986).

Conversely, when interacting with participants who had achieved significant economic success in Portugal, such as business owners, the dynamic shifted again. In these cases, I occasionally felt a subtle pressure to "prove" the intellectual rigor and value of my project, as my academic status was juxtaposed against their tangible material achievements. This echoes Samadov's (2025) observation among Tajik migrants, where, despite a shared ethnic background, his educational privilege led participants to reposition him as an "outsider" disconnected from their lived economic precarity. My own experience resonates with this: sharing a Confucian heritage did not guarantee an understanding of the specific financial pressures and survival strategies that shaped my participants' transnational care practices.

Moreover, educational background emerged as another crucial dimension of power. I observed that participants with higher levels of formal education tended to frame their experiences in terms that were more abstract and generalized. For instance, Informant S, who had a postgraduate degree, often spoke using collective pronouns like "We Chinese people..." rather than offering personal views about her own family. This rhetorical strategy created a distance between her individual struggles and the cultural norm she invoked, potentially shielding her from vulnerability. In contrast, participants with less formal education were often more direct and narrative-driven, sharing intimate details of their daily caregiving challenges. This difference highlights how educational capital can be deployed within the interview setting to manage the researcher-researched relationship and control the level of personal disclosure.

In qualitative research, researchers themselves are important research tools, and their identities affect the relationship with research participants. When researchers have different identities from participants they need to build rapport, and when they share the same identity they need to adjust their expectations to maintain a research position (Secules et al., 2021). Being an immigrant, shared experience allowed me to gain trust of participants, and they were more willing to talk. Researchers should be

alert to the fact that those with higher educational experience, higher social-economic status, or (in the case of female researchers) a sense of gender-based entitlement may try to reverse the relationships through aggressive or implicit phrases or words. The situation was different with middle-class participants who did not show any tendency to correct interview questions. Underpinned by Berger (2015), the power relationship between researcher and informants is likely to be shaped by the researcher's own social position: informants may find the researcher's status attractive, seeing it as a hopeful model of what they, or their children, could become.

c) The nature of the researcher–researched relationship

While the previous section examined how positionality shaped power relations during the interviews, this section focuses on understanding the nature of the researcher–researched relationship. This requires moving beyond questions of authority to consider how relationships themselves were co-produced throughout the research process. Instead of serving as a neutral channel through which information was documented, the interviews constituted relational encounters in which both researcher and participants actively shaped the conditions under which knowledge could emerge. In line with Berger (2015), positionality was not a background feature but an ongoing relational process that influenced the interpretations of participants regarding my presence and how I understood their narratives.

My relationship with each participant might be characterized as negotiated intimacy. Our shared linguistic and cultural background often facilitated trust, and informants were encouraged to discuss highly personal experiences around transnational caregiving, feelings of guilt, filial obligations, and family conflict. However, this closeness could never be taken for granted. Participants were continuously assessing whether I could sufficiently understand their experiences, while simultaneously questioning whether I was distant enough to ensure confidentiality and non-judgment. As a result, intimacy emerged not from cultural similarity alone but through ongoing interaction, mutual disclosure, and the gradual development of trust. My position as a Chinese migrant and doctoral researcher both enabled and constrained these interactions, creating a relationship that was neither fully insider nor fully outsider.

At the core of this relationship lies a profound emotional asymmetry. Several interviewees described feeling of guilt associated with being unable to provide physical care for aging parents left in the home country. In one interview, a participant became visibly distressed while recalling her mother's illness in China. Moments such as these transformed the interview from a formal research interaction into a space of emotional exchange. While participants shared deeply personal experiences, I retained the institutional authority to analyze, interpret, and represent their accounts. Such emotional moments required careful ethical management. Participants were informed that they could continue interview or take a temporary pause; they were also given the right to skip questions or redirect the conversation. These practices

provided an instant aid for both myself and the participants and helped maintain an appropriate rhythm within the interview. Following Pillow (2003), reflexivity requires recognizing that knowledge production is inseparable from questions of vulnerability, representation, and methodological power.

Questions of representation further revealed the relational nature of the research process. Several participants expressed anxiety about how their stories, particularly those involving conflict or perceived failure in filial duties, would be presented. Their worries along the lines of “Will you make us look bad?” reflected an awareness that narratives do not simply belong to participants once they enter academic analysis. Consequently, maintaining a “relational awareness” (Warin, 2011) became essential. Rather than viewing participants’ accounts as objective data, I sought to remain attentive to how my interpretations might impact the meanings linked to their experiences and to avoid reducing complex family relationships to simplified cultural explanations.

The temporality of the researcher–researched relationship revealed its fragile and often unresolved nature. While most formal interactions were brief, emotional connections frequently persisted. On several occasions, participants reached out to me weeks after our interviews with updates about their family situations. This resonated with Thomson and Gunter’s (2010) concept of the “liquid identity” of the researcher, situated between professional distance and human engagement. Managing this ambiguity required continuous negotiation of ethical boundaries while recognizing an ongoing responsibility toward those whose experiences formed the basis of the research.

Ultimately, the link between researcher and participant proved far from static or top-down: it was a negotiated, interactive process. Viewing this engagement through the lens of co-production underscores that insights into transnational filiality did not exist in isolation within individual narratives or analytical framework, they emerged directly from the dynamic, ethically nuanced field where researcher and participant actively met.

5. Discussions and conclusions

This study delves into the complex terrain of researcher positionality within the context of transnational Chinese filial practices, revealing that the insider–outsider dichotomy is not a methodological problem to be solved but a dynamically emerging space requiring critical reflection. By integrating insights on research access, power relations, and interpersonal connections, we gain a more nuanced understanding of how knowledge is co-produced in qualitative research.

The central argument of this paper is that effective ethnographic engagement, particularly on sensitive topics such as family obligation within a diasporic community, demands moving beyond static identity labels towards what Berger (2015) calls an active, ongoing process of reflexivity. My initial assumption that a shared cultural

background would simplify data collection was quickly overturned in the field. Reality unfolded as an ongoing process of negotiation as my position shifted fluidly according to participants' own geographical, class, and gender identities. This experience powerfully validates Yip's (2024) assertion that perceived homogeneity can be a methodological trap, obscuring the rich heterogeneity within any cultural group. The true value of my positional stance did not stem from a pre-assumed insider status but in my ability to leverage my "liquid identity" (Thomson & Gunter, 2011), a state of being perpetually "in-between", to ask questions that an outsider might not think to ask, while simultaneously maintaining enough critical distance to avoid the assumptions that a complete insider might make.

Furthermore, this research underscores that reflexivity is not an isolated intellectual exercise but a fundamentally relational practice within the specific context of transnational Chinese migration. As Warin (2011) defines it, reflexivity involves "relational awareness", which in this research became particularly visible in moments where participants narrated emotionally long-distance caregiving experiences. As presented previously, several interview encounters highlighted the emotional distress of being unable to care for aging parents in China, especially when faced with expectations of filial responsibility shaped by Confucian norms. These reflections were embedded expressions of moral tension in the migration condition, where geographical separation intensifies emotional obligations (Baldassar, 2015). In such situations, the interview encounter became a site in which transnational filial obligations were actively negotiated rather than passively reported.

These ethical moments must therefore be understood in the broader methodological debates within migration research. Similar reflexive tensions have been documented in studies of Chinese diaspora communities: researchers have illustrated how shared ethnicity does not fully translate into trust, and may even intensify concerns around "saving face" and moral judgment (Ganga & Scott, 2006; Katyal & King, 2014). Aligning with Milligan's (2016) "inbetweeners" position, my experience confirms that researcher positionality in migration studies is neither fixed nor stable but constantly produced through interaction with participants' own interpretations of identity, status, and belonging. This reinforces the argument made by Carling et al. (2024) that insider-outsider categories are insufficient for capturing the layered realities of transnational social fields.

To sum up, this paper contributes to the field in three ways. Methodologically, it posits reflexivity as an embedded, relational process rather than a retrospective narrative tool, particularly in research on family obligations and care arrangements. In terms of migration studies, it demonstrates that Chinese migrant experiences of filial piety are not fixed cultural practices; instead, these concepts are continuously reconstructed, contested, and practiced through the dual lenses of individual life histories and the structural constraints of the host country. Theoretically, it advances the argument that knowledge production in transnational family is co-constructed through ethically charged interactions, where researcher positionality is an active component of the data in place of an external condition.

For future scholars, the key lesson is this: the most profound insights often emerge not from the comfort of assumed belonging but from the productive discomfort of the threshold. Only by engaging in reflective practices that are both critically conscious and relationally grounded can researchers cross this threshold, producing research that is not only analytically rigorous but also ethically legitimate and resonant with humanity.

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