Experiencing “Paragliding”: A Student-Teacher Perspective on Doing Qualitative Research in a Chinese University

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Abstract
In this article, I (the first author) explore my qualitative research teaching for a cohort of Chinese students and their interactions in the classroom. These students reported experiencing feelings of paragliding from unsafe distrust to enjoyment through writings, drawings, questionings, feelings, reflections, and struggles. By graphic elicitation, I unfold a cartography of becoming a qualitative researcher and describe lines of becoming-events that entangle with rhizomatic relationships of self and language, self and other, and self and knowledge. The process of learning and teaching qualitative research involved multiple interactions, connections, reflections on the contingencies along the way, and searching for the meanings of life and research under the governance of audit culture. This paper contributes to qualitative research teaching and unpacks its impacts on learners, and it also calls for scholars, particularly those from China, to reassess the value of qualitative research in the academic field.

Keywords
qualitative research teaching, becoming-event, reflections, graphic elicitation, audit culture

Introduction
Global ranking exercises of universities have deeply altered research agendas, leading to an increasingly competitive higher education environment that often emphasizes the number of publications rather than the quality of research (Allen, 2021). Hence, both academic institutes and individuals have been transformed into “auditable” entities that are encouraged to focus their energies on doing “what counts” (Shore & Wright, 2015a, p. 423). In 2017, China’s Ministry of Education initiated a reform-based performance-related double first-class university strategy (Peters & Besley, 2018) to enhance the level of scientific research.

University X, where I have worked, was one of the 95 institutions that were granted special public funding of the strategy. The pressure to match the newly-granted identity of being a double first-class university has caused a series of reforms, and one of the reforms in my workplace was the employment of highly productive scholars. Since then, audit culture has permeated the institute and tends to encourage the production of “calculative, responsible, self-managing subjects” (Shore & Wright, 2015a, p. 421). Every academic performance has been reduced to numbers and ranked in league tables (Shore & Wright, 2015a). Rather than peer review-based academic quality assessment, the quantitative measurement of academic performance renders scholars in the field of Humanities and Social Sciences more vulnerable than those in the so-called hard sciences (Gao & Zheng, 2020). In this calculative rationality, individual experience and values are comprehensively devalued and ignored.

About this Study
Teaching qualitative research (QR) methods in the Institute of Linguistics, the predominant epistemological direction of which is positivism and scientism, posed a great challenge for...
me as well as for the students, who are trained in scientific ways of analyzing the structures of language and the causal relations between language and the world. In this class, some students have chosen sociolinguistics as their specialty area, and others have chosen linguistic theory, such as syntax, phonology, linguistic typology, and so on. All volunteer students who showed interest in participating in my exploratory research were postgraduate students who mainly major in sociolinguistics.

In this course, my goal was to introduce an interpretive method that would enable them to approach knowledge and reality from the perspective of their life experiences, yet I was often questioned regarding the legitimacy of QR. For example, when I talked about how researchers collected data from interviews using QR, a student questioned the usage of the word “data” and claimed that the information from interviews could only be called “materials,” not “data,” a term that is considered exclusive to experimental research. These students posed serious questions, such as “How can subjective observation and writing be counted as legitimate research?”; “If QR cannot prove the samples are representative, how can it produce scientific findings and survive in the academic world?”; “If QR research cannot help us get cause-effect results, how can it claim to be a form of knowledge?” Instead of responding to them with the so-called standard “correct” answers to end their critical thinking, I encouraged them to develop their questions based on their immediate personal experience. I believe that QR offers methods for us to approach the reality of “the experiential domain,” rather than absolute causal relationships and the possibility of a context-free ontology (Herzfeld, 2017, p. 131).

These students are all beings with their particular memories, approaches to knowledge, and experiences, and they are used to approaching knowledge through the pursuit of objectivity and the avoidance of the subjective. These attitudes have been drummed into them through the endless repetition of examinations, which are still the focus of Chinese education. The production of subjectivities in the Chinese education system is still directed by exemplarity, ritual, and examination (Wu, 2016). Students’ learning experience is dominated by repetitive practices of objectivist exercises and the rote learning of a unique standardized answer to each inquiry, regardless of whether they are studying social or natural sciences. Scores and rankings become the legitimate goal. Having been trained to replicate the standard answer to each question during high school years, the students may find it difficult to accept that there could be no standard answer to an inquiry. As such, the transformation of these learners into researchers is an open-ended process of becoming. However, I decided to have a go. I read works on teaching QR (Bartels & Wageman, 2018; Cox, 2012; Galdas, 2017; Subramaniam, 2021) and realized that convincing these learners to accept QR as a legitimate research method would not be an easy process. When the teaching was over, I started to record this process, as writing is “an act of hope” (Badley, 2020, p. 247).

In my classroom, I asked the students to focus on specific events in which they could discover the process of becoming QR researchers through experience. The challenge for me was to raise their awareness of that process through various dialogical events. These dialogical events became critical opportunities for inquiry where we could explore new pedagogies (Irwin, 2013). In line with Deleuze, Semetsky (2006, p. 78) defined an event as “an element of becoming, and the becoming is unlimited, similar to the rhizome whose underground sprout does not have a traditional root but a stem, the oldest part of which dies off while simultaneously rejuvenating itself at the tip.” We become qualitative researchers through different events that entangle with rhizomatic relationships of self and language, self and other, and self and knowledge (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

The events in teaching and learning QR hinge on “learning to turn experiences of doubt and excitement into a dialogical process of asking creative questions, imagining new ideas, and animating a practical relationship to the world” (Bartels & Wageman, 2018, p. 192). By imagining new ideas, the students gradually begin to transform themselves from learners to researchers who allow more space for doubts and discussions. The events that I discuss below involve these QR learners’ verbal discourses, phenomenological descriptions, written texts, and their sensorial experience of QR. These are ways of communicating about how a QR class transforms scientist learners in search of simplified scientific truth into reflexive selves in search of complex meanings. I tried my best to make this teaching and learning process interesting. Unexpectedly, some students shared their struggles with me at a session in the mid-term. Thus, the analysis seeks to answer two research questions:

1. What were these Chinese learners’ internal struggles while being taught different qualitative methods?
2. How did these QR learners and I enrich ourselves in the process of learning and teaching QR?

Multi-Voiced Ethnography as Method

What I will present here is a multi-voiced ethnography, and I adopt this method to describe the process of becoming QR researchers with my students during the course as a ceaseless flux of what we do, suffer, and achieve through gaining connections with self, others, and the world. Specifically, I interweave the researchers’ voices, students’ voices, and the academic voices of anthropological scholars in our readings into the texture of this paper. Various voices form the dialogues in the interactive ethnography to demonstrate the individuals’ doubts, struggles and beliefs on the way to becoming QR researchers. This is an attempt to become more polyphonic and dialogic to include and interpret different voices in society (Juffermans & Van der Aa, 2013). Among the 25 students who registered for the class, 14 volunteers and their “voices” appear in the paper.
Their voices were recorded, described, and interpreted. As a teacher–scholar, I wrote teaching dairies so that their voices can be presented in a multi-voiced ethnography. All of these were used as data in this paper. These volunteer students supported my writing and they made up pseudonyms for this project, and the words and pictures that I cite from their writings were approved by them. Though the reading materials for this course are mostly in English, the dialogues between the professor and the students were in Chinese. All the data were translated by the first author.

In response to the students who struggled to understand the legitimacy of the non-objective knowledge produced by QR, I cited Geertz’s (1973) distinction between experimental science in search of law on the one hand and interpretive science in search of meaning on the other hand. Geertz’s metaphor of webs of significance renders a vivid picture of a spider’s daily activity. Similarly, human beings construct the meanings of life through language. Language is thus the spider yarn that human beings use to interweave the meanings of their lives. Individuals use language in a personal way to make sense of their lives; even in a shared time and space, they will come up with different descriptions and pictures of the world. “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (Wittgenstein et al., 1922, p. 68); this highlights how our perception and description are limited by language.

**Narrating and Discussing Dialogic Events**

**Event 1: Experiencing the Same Time and Space.** In order for the students to experience diversified descriptions and interpretations, I designed a writing activity by asking each student to check the time on their smart phone to make sure that we were living in the same time, and to look around the classroom to confirm that we were living in the same space. As we were exposed to the same time and space, we were to write down what we had observed, heard, and felt. After 5 minutes, we shared our responses. Some described the objects in the classroom, such as the fluorescent lamps one inch away from the ceiling, the hard tables on which they were writing, the color and fiber of the curtains by the window, the large computer screens on each table. Some described the shoes, shirts, and trousers their classmates were wearing. A student described different scenes that she encountered on the way to campus in the early morning. Some focused on the number of computer screens on each table. Some described the shoes, color and the ceiling, the hard tables on which they were writing, the classroom, such as the exposed to the same time and space, we were to write down conclusions and details. So, ethnographers should try to propose versions of ethnographers’ experiences of reality that are as close as possible to the specific context, “the embodied, sensory, and affective experiences, and the negotiations and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced” (Pink, 2013, p. 35). Pink (2015) exhorts the
anthropologist to become a “sensory apprentice” by gaining knowledge through embodied practice and closer attention to all of the human senses. For example, sensory knowledge can be developed through the sociality of food practices (Walmsley, 2005). Pennycook and Otsuji (2015) included the olfactory sense in the process of place making, and they argued that the olfactory sense offered associational rather than intentional meanings to the situated meaning. Following Pink (2008, p. 183), who employed “walking and eating as ways of ethnographic knowing” in the place-making process, I arranged a session for students to write down what they tasted, smelled, and felt in the classroom. I explained that when we do research, we tend to rely mostly on our eyes and ears to observe and to listen (Fabian, 1984). However, our interpretation of an event is also affected by the temperature and the smell around us. As qualitative researchers, we should sensitize our sensory organs: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and hands. That is, we should see, hear, smell, taste, and touch the world. Before the session, I sent a message asking students to bring their favorite fruit to the classroom. When it came to the “Taste and Describe” part, some of them shared one banana or one orange. They tasted the fruit carefully and began to describe the smell, the taste, and the feelings they experienced in their mouths. Then they spent 15 minutes writing down what they had tasted, touched, and smelled. A student named Alvin described the taste and color of a red dragon fruit as follows:

I thought what I bought was white dragon fruit. I didn’t expect that when I cut it, it turned out to be red. As I didn’t want to make a mess on my desk, I put a piece of white paper under the fruit. To my surprise the redness was beyond my imagination, which made me doubt whether this was the white dragon fruit turned red by injecting artificial pigment … It tastes sweet. I am imagining that now my belly is full of pigment. (Alvin’s note, 2019)

When these students finished their writing, inspired by Sommer’s (2014) experiment with “literature on the clothesline,” where participants are encouraged to hang their writing on a clothesline with clothespins for instant publication, I suggested that the students who were willing to share their writings should pin their work on the front whiteboard. Following the spirit of “enjoying each person’s particularity” (Sommer, 2014, p. 121) and the method of inciting students’ curiosity about the texts they were currently reading, I hoped the process of displaying their own work and the reading of their peers’ work might arouse “pride in a good piece of writing, greater development of interpretive possibilities, and also admiration for others” (Sommer, 2014, p. 130). I also hoped that these students would feel proud of themselves and express admiration for each other’s work. I tried to assure their fear of being judged by saying,

Don’t worry about the quality of your writing. We won’t judge the writing by scores. Just take the writing as works of art. We can appreciate the work of art from different perspectives … Don’t be afraid of sharing your writing here on this whiteboard. (Teaching diary 2019)

Twelve students, almost half of the class, came to pin their writings. Observing some hesitation, I assured them that I understood the private nature of writing and would respect their choices. Finally, everyone came to the front to read their classmates’ writing with curiosity and interest. They were reading and moving to read the next. Small chats and chuckles enlivened the classroom. I felt satisfied that they were being exposed to the range of their peers’ writings, believing that “variety, even miscommunication and disagreement, enriches the experience of the text, and readers learn to admire peculiarities” (Sommer, 2014, p. 121).

The sharing of writing, however, not only stimulated admiration and appreciation of others’ work, even when the latter consisted of indisputable works of art. A student, Elaine, shared her reflection about the private/public nature of writing for public display at the end of the semester. She recalled the realization that writing could be both a process of self-dialogue and a dialogue with others:

At that moment, I subconsciously thought that writing was a written form of self-reflection for myself to read. When the idea of ‘writing being both public and private’ emerged, I realized that I had been practicing ‘dissociative identity in writing’ for a long time; that is, I need a common linguistic system to enable others to understand my ideas and an ‘individual dialect’ to have a dialogue with myself. (Elaine’s note, 2019)

Instead of merely triggering appreciation of peers’ writings, this sharing made students reflect on the limits of their own writing, saturated as it was with abstract concepts and theoretical jargon.

The class incited my writing panic which has been covered with dust for many years. It seems that I have lost the linguistic capacity for describing the real world. What is direct description? Why can’t I write down the authentic feelings of interactions with the world like others? Why did I wish to overlook the world from the upper perspective charged with my preconceptions? Why is it that what I see is not what I saw? It seems that I have lost my narrative voice. (Elaine’s reflective note, 2019)

Elaine sent me the reflective note after the class. I then started to wonder what kind of language QR research should encourage. Should researchers write in a language other than their own native tongue? I began to sense that QR leads researchers to become familiar with others’ forms of expression and thereby to expand their own language and perspectives.

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**Event 3: ‘I had no Idea What this Course was Talking About’**

After six sessions of this course, Andy submitted his homework for the first time by email and explained why his homework was
late by a month. He wrote, “Professor, I had no idea what this course was talking about. I didn’t know the meaning of qualitative research until the specific methods were taught.” I recalled a demonstration of fragments of some students’ homework of oral history in the previous session and guessed that oral history might be the “specific method” he referred to. Andy’s explanation made me want to know more about students’ responses so far. Perhaps I should start with specific approaches such as interviews and coding data, without preemptively designing the writing and observation activities that would enable them to feel the boundaries between language and the world.

In the session on methods using “focus groups,” I decided to combine the focus group with graphic elicitation (Bagnoli, 2009), hoping to know more about these students’ opinions of the course. After the students tried graphic elicitation, using diagrams and portraits to stimulate dialogue in research interviews (Bravington & King, 2019) with their friends and family members, I applied the same method to the class members. I gave each student a piece of paper and asked them to show by drawing what they felt and thought about the course and what recommendations they wanted to make for future sessions. Most of them adopted the self-portrait approach, an arts-based projective technique, the aim of which is to encourage participants’ reflexivity and the capacity to think holistically about their lives (Bagnoli, 2009).

**Event 4: Experiencing Paragliding**

Raine’s self-portrait (Figure 1) of experiencing my QR class illustrated the process of accepting new experience as legitimate knowledge and of the consequent broadening of the horizons of knowledge. Graduating from her initially insecure and trembling paragliding to free flight, she gradually grasped the meaning of QR through practicing oral history with her family members. She explained her drawing to the class as follows:

I sketched this picture. At the beginning of the QR class, I thought that the professor’s way of lecturing was too free, which left me with the feeling of paragliding. So, I was trembling. These wavy lines stood for my continuous trembling. After learning QR for a longer period, I found that QR did not have so many frames. It was very free. I thus took off the umbrella and soared into the sky as a whole being. The objects below me stand for the things I saw, for example, these are the houses. The whole world is more spacious. I feel that I become more tolerant, more willing to accept different things. These are the mountains, rivers, representing nature. On the left, it’s humanity. On the right, it’s nature. I can accept broader horizons. The black spots are of different kinds, the cubic represented the landscape on the street. They represent our society. … On the right, they are my Mum, my Dad, and my brother. By means of oral history, I feel that I know more about their past. I hope I can have more connections with them from the past to the future. Before, I just chatted with them about some family chores and knew little about them. Now I want to have more connections with them and have deeper communications. By means of oral history, I get to know that the unrestricted methods can enable me to discover many things that were unknown to me. (Raine’s Illustration in Class 2019)

Raine used the metaphor of paragliding to describe her experience of learning QR, as she initially thought my way of teaching was too free. The experience of knowing without any frames frightened her and left her trembling. I inferred her trembling might come from a sense of insecurity in approaching experiential knowledge. Knowing without frames brings an awareness of its contingency and unpredictability as social knowledge, maybe the most insecure form of knowing of all (Herzfeld, 2017).

After several sessions, especially after the practice of oral history with her friends and family members, Raine started to feel the value of QR. Raine shared her understanding of how the collection of oral history had transformed her relationship with her family. She found that “the unrestricted methods” enabled her to “learn things that were unknown to her before.” Oral history has no unified subject; it is told from a multitude of points of view, with partiality, unfinishedness, and contingency (Portelli, 2009). The practice of oral history has opened and reconnected her with her family members in a deeper way. It seems that she has accepted experiential learning and stopped taking knowledge as the authoritative truth of scientific discourse. Instead of asking, “How do we come to know the truth?” she now asks, “How do we come to endow experience with meaning?” (Bruner, 1986, p. 12).

**Event 5: Experiencing the Cruelty of Becoming a Researcher**

Another student, Ann, sketched her thoughts about the QR learning experience. The sketch looked like a cartoon...
describing complex life stories. We had a long conversation about her struggles in learning QR. With the timeline running from left to right, she started describing her experience as it moved from wondering whether her writing should be descriptive or interpretive, to worrying whether a researcher is capable of interweaving personal observations into the narration of an event. The following dialogue, based on Ann’s portrait (Figure 2), demonstrates our shared reflections of self and other, self and the world, and self and knowledge:

Ann: OK, this is the professor (the woman at the left upper timeline with a heart sign). At the beginning I thought this professor was so nice, so different, and beautiful. In the first class you taught us how to observe and write observations down. I liked observing the world and writing before I took the class. So, I got very interested. Then the homework was to observe something in our everyday life. [On the second session, I (the professor) had shared Sally’s thick description of a bus station and made some comments on how language directed our attention to reality. Our readers’ curiosity and inquiry began with these detailed descriptions.] Sally’s description is so different from mine. I liked writing and processing things into different shapes. My subconscious has already helped me convert the thing into something else.

First author: For example, there is a pot of water hyacinth.

Ann: If I were to describe it, I would write, ‘the green is flowing’ rather than ‘a pot of green plants over there.’ I am wondering about the relation between what I see and what I think I see. I think Qualitative Inquiry is like the mover of phenomena. But I am used to interpreting the phenomena. If I were required to write things like Sally, naturally moving some authentic things, I found my inner voice was objecting: ‘No, I don’t want to move things like that. I want to create things myself. I want to build my own things. I don’t want to move those phenomena and show them to others. I will think that this is being a mere mouthpiece. That self is a human who has become a tool’.

First author: Then you can organize different voices into your own opinion. When Sima Qian wrote the Book of History, he interwove different historical records and oral stories into his own understanding of an issue. It is the author who organizes different voices into descriptions and plots. The voices and data you collected are like knitting wool. You need to weave them into a sweater. You can decide which style of sweater and knitting method you will employ or create. Participant observation and interviews are for you to collect different kinds of knitting wool. You can weave them into different meanings by the act of writing and interpreting. Thus, everyone will come up with different sweaters. So here, you posed the question ‘Who am I?’

Ann: This is the most puzzling question that has arisen throughout the learning of QR, and I am getting more and more perplexed. The first two classes brought me into my childhood. Meanwhile, they brought me into a very cruel place because this class emphasized that everyone was different. Everyone’s difference should be respected. Maybe my self-ego is too strong. I thought that I was more different than others. However, when I read others’ writing, I found that they could show something that I didn’t think of before. Suddenly I felt that I was not that important. This is very cruel. … This made me feel that I was especially ordinary; I had the feeling that I had failed in my pursuit of particularity. … There is a conflict between my inner self-identity and the demonstrated identity. The demonstrated self I construct for others to see and my inner-self that I see myself are different. This class made me reflect on the relationship between the two selves. Now the constructed self for others made me lose my inner-self.

First author: Goffman said that everyone wore masks.

Ann: Yes, the longer you wear that mask, the less possible it becomes to tear it off. You want to shape yourself into a person of marked individuality. But in reality, you are the same as most people, like peas in a pod. This is a very cruelly paradoxical truth. Sally’s writing made me feel lost even though she had demonstrated things that were so simple. This is a whole new individual beyond my understanding … We all construct our own worlds and I am only one among all of them, very insignificant. After I took this class and really saw the outside world, I could not look directly at myself. I am full of self-doubt.

First author: Actually, we talked about the concept of banal diversity this morning. Diversity is in our everyday life, and everyone is different from others.

Ann: Yes. I am especially reluctant to admit this diversity…. This course drew me out of my own world. In the first class, the teacher said that QR methods enable us to respect diversity and respect the fact that everyone is different. I pondered that, wow, it was just as I had thought. At the beginning I felt that this was a special class. After
I had observed the people around me with a cool mind, I felt that my particularity could not be called individuality at all. When everyone has his or her own individuality, this cannot be called individuality.

First author: But everyone’s individuality is different. It is like different flowers in the garden. Different kinds of flowers are what make the garden beautiful.

Ann: Yes, there are so many flowers of so many kinds. When you really look at them from God’s perspective, which one will you look at first? I hope that God can see that biggest one floating on the top. And the others are small and tiny little ones. In that way, I really respect diversity. But I am the one who is different from all of you. I see you tiny ones. You are different. Now that the teacher has dragged me away from God’s perspective, I cannot find myself among them. I cannot distinguish myself from others. For the first sharing time, everyone was so willing to share their writing. I saw that everyone was so rich in thoughts. Basically, they have considered whatever I have thought of. And their thinking was even more distinct than mine. In every piece of writing I read, I saw a different world. I had a sense of crisis. I was in a great panic. The meaning of this course is more of a departure for me than it is for others. Maybe I am a sensitive person. It is a painful process of drawing me out of my uniqueness in the garden. I cannot find myself in that garden any more as I am immersed in the little flowers now. Maybe I will be less sad after I really locate which one is my own self and analyze what makes it different from others. Before this class, I liked observing people around me, though not from a QR perspective. I am very sensitive. Suddenly I have been turned from an observer who observes others into the one who is observed. I found that people can observe me as well. Before this I was in control. I had all the power. I am here to observe you. I am different from you. It’s my right to interpret you. When my classmates interviewed me, I found that others were interpreting me as well. They all have God’s perspectives. When I was observed, I suddenly felt that I was not that important. I can observe others, and others can observe me too. I thus became one of the flowers. I repeatedly talked about how everyone set themselves at the center. This course let me feel that I am so humble. Now I am at the stage of knowing the fact but being reluctant to accept it.

Becoming a researcher was cruel for Ann, and she began to ask herself constantly, “Who am I?” She has gone through inner struggles searching for the answer. These struggles surfaced when Ann began to question her relation with others and with the world, and to think about the irrevocability of her own situation. It was a painful experience for her to realize her peers’ diversified individualities through their writing. She was honest with herself in admitting that she had needed to feel that her acceptance of diversity was predicated on the assumption of her superiority over others. I did not expect that this sharing activity would bring some of them into a relationship of mutual comparison, if not, perhaps, of outright competition.

In the Chinese educational context, “students are constantly tested and compared to make them aware of their ‘weaknesses’ in comparison to standards of evaluation” (Wu, 2006, pp. 343–344). Various terms are invented to differentiate students, and put them into relationships of competition. For example, besides “excellent student” and “slow student,” the contemporary popular terms to describe the learners are “xue ba” (academic conqueror) and “xue zha” (academic dregs). Many students are thrown into an inner struggle to make sense of themselves according to their ranking in examinations. To know oneself through comparing and competing with others was the last thing I wanted to encourage. This is the trap of audit culture; it is the neoliberal strategy of governing by subjecting students to constant ranking and stoking fierce competition among them. That is why Ann wanted to be the largest flower floating at the top of the garden, as this meant that she would always be the first to be seen. Her pain sprang from the discovery that this class had emphasized everyone’s unique voices and offered no ranking. Ann felt at a loss when she experienced others’ diversified individualities. This sense of loss nudged her to reflect on herself and open herself to possible changes. She realized that all the students had been accustomed to setting themselves at the center of individual universes; that is what led her to claim, “This course made me feel that I am so humble.” The moment she realized that her authentic moral self was self-centered, she began to be carried out beyond herself to find herself (Dewey, 1980).

Rather than accepting an ordinary self, Ann began to pay more attention to the life experience of her family members and her friends. This self-inquiry process set her on the road to becoming a qualitative researcher who could perceive the multiplicity of any individual’s selves. A researcher, in the process of inquiry, becomes a nomadic subject who is displaced and deterritorialized (Semetsky, 2006). Most disturbing for her was the experience of being observed and described by others. The shift in the balance between the identities of subject/observer and the object/observed left her bereft of her central status in interpreting the world. The process of shifting perspectives from self to other and the experience of being described made her more aware of shifting perspectives.

**Event 6: Everyone has Created a Book**

Inspired by Sommer’s (2014, p. 115) “Cartonera books” that used recycled cardboard to make beautiful book covers, I encouraged students to bring all their observations, interviews, and ethnographic homework to our last session and create their own books. I suggested they bring a clean paper delivery box and some unwanted fashion magazines, and I brought pens, pencils, ribbons of various colors, scissors, several bars of glue, and a hole-puncher. I shared some pictures that I took in a book store and showed how the books were categorized as “Best-sellers,” “The Most-loved Books,” “The Unsaleable Books,” “Unique Perspectives,” “Less Favored Themes.” We read the titles and book covers together. Some of them showed
great interest in the more arresting titles. Some designs made us all laugh. A few said that they would like to buy books listed under the heading of “Unsaleable Books.” I asked them
to imagine the titles and cover designs of their own books, and the areas in which they would prefer to see their books ex-
hibited. The pictures and words in the fashion magazines were for cutting and pasting into their pages. George soon raised his hand and asked, ”Professor, the homework across the whole semester was about different topics and themes; how can I think of a book title to link them all up?” I responded, “Well, you will come up with the same challenge when you have finished the chapters of your MA thesis. You need to find a line to string your pearls together. You can go through your writings and come up with a cool word or phrase to serve as your title. Or you could have discussion with your neighbors around the table.” Some of them began to discuss while others began to cut the cardboard in preparation for making their book covers. Sunny asked if she could play music while everyone was busy making their books. I gave her permission, at which point a popular nursery rhyme, “Leap Frog,” was played and replayed in the classroom. This happy song made the students bubble with laughter.

After around 50 minutes, everyone’s book was almost ready. We started our Book Fair. Various concepts of what books could be were generated: a bag in which various pages were organized in the order of time, a multidimensional book whose five faces held different pages of diaries of personal reflection, a secret forest-themed book bearing a name unintelligible to me. They read each other’s work, took photos, and asked questions. Several of their books were published in the Crispy Duck Publishing House, while others were published by Harvard Publishing House. They created their publishing houses for themselves within these 3 hours. (Figure 3).

The results were impressive. One book was titled “Dis-
covering QR: Walk into the Unknown.” Nico’s book was titled “Lus” (light) in Italian, and Sonia’s book was titled “De l’ombre à la lumière” in French (from the shadow to the light). Both these books used the word “light” to indicate what QR experience had brought them. Sonia explained, “It was what I felt. I didn’t know what QR was and felt like being in darkness at the beginning. Later I found that if QR has a mission, it should be a beam of light that illuminates the place where no one has ever been” (WeChat conversation, 2020). I feel this light can find an echo in the interpretation of QR as “a moral, allegorical, and therapeutic project” (Denzin, 2017, p. 10).

The experience of learning QR by doing and writing was represented as a beam of light and the humble setaria’s whisper and shout. Here, the word “setaria,” a widespread grass in the wild field, was used by Ann to describe her humble self. She realized that she was ordinary, yet she still wanted toutter her strong voice. The light finds an echo in Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987, p. 84) perception of writing: “To write is perhaps to bring this assemblage of the unconscious to the light of day, to select the whispering voices, to gather the tribes and secret idioms from which I extract something I call my Self (Moi).” Laura’s book was titled “Waldeinsamkeit,” and she explained the meaning of this German word to me: “It is solitude in the forest. I like this kind of beauty” (WeChat conversation, 2020). I checked it online and found that “early uses of Waldeinsamkeit came from German Romantic poetry that celebrates the quiet serenity of being solitary in the woods.”

Laura’s book was titled “Waldeinsamkeit,” and she explained the meaning of this German word to me: “It is solitude in the forest. I like this kind of beauty” (WeChat conversation, 2020). I checked it online and found that “early uses of Waldeinsamkeit came from German Romantic poetry that celebrates the quiet serenity of being solitary in the woods.” Nico intertextualized the words from the fashion magazine into her book by cutting the phrase “Take a road that was less traveled by” in Chinese and pasting it at the right bar of the back cover. Then she selected another passage to express her feeling about QR: “I was not the person who could find the right way at the very beginning. By this way, my heart can accompany me to arrive at the dreamland. I traveled a way that was trodden by a few.”

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This paper shares the experience of teaching and learning qualitative methods as a process of interactions, connections, and reflections on the contingencies. The course offers possibilities for students to think alternatively and accept qualitative methods as a legitimate research approach. It suggests a qualitative way of perceiving the world, both flexible and open-minded. Rather than guarantee a “successful” indoctrination of the qualitative perspectives, this research and teaching reminds students to be aware of social experience and recognize the contexts and contingencies of all knowledge. This is also a way to expose the students to the realist perspectives besides the positivism that they are used to (Herzfeld, 2017). We agree
that “every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes” (Dewey, 2015, p. 35). The experience of learning and teaching QR has introduced these participants to the possibility of becoming QR researchers. Rather than being an intentional induction of students to mastering QR as a method, the interactions with the students happened in a space where both teacher and students were able to explore the unknown (Ingold, 2018).

In a world dominated by numbers (Shore & Wright, 2015b), qualitative research is the way less traveled by, especially in the Institute of Linguistics. Amid ongoing research in neurolinguistics, computational linguistics, and corpus linguistics, my research was often criticized in a kindly way by my colleagues as non-scientific, non-representational, non-causal, and non-fundable. One colleague once told me “What made me dislike your research is that it lacks causal reasoning. How can one case stand for the majority of the population? What is the use of your research? This is a piece of prose rather than a research paper?” I argued back forcefully “How could the large numbers count without knowing in depth every individual’s feelings, thinking, and doing? Everyone’s story is worthy of being heard and recorded.” He finally compromised, “Well, that’s why you cannot get any funding from our state” (Teaching Diary, 2020). I understand this colleague’s reminder, as currently, QR in the academic field in China has not been widely accepted and applied under the local version of audit culture. I also understand that “those carrying out the audits are not just governing subjects but also governed exemplarity subjects” (Kipnis, 2008, p. 282).

In this culture, the number of publications, research projects, and successful funding applications is what, quite literally, counts. Rankings have become the dominant means of academic governance. Their prevalence absorbs vast resources, insinuates market logic into the academic arena, and diminishes professional autonomy (Sauder & Espeland, 2009). Fortunately, these students discovered that the recognition of experience as contingent and uncertain conflicts with the premise of an ultimately knowable truth. They also discovered that no such “digital” truth really exists, and that the prevalence of scientism in academic evaluation is a form of power that interferes with the academic capacity to explore the unknown. The multi-voiced classroom of QR has provided an open access to different voices and perspectives. On their way to becoming qualitative researchers, moreover, the students enhanced their ability to respect and accept multivocality in schools and society. I believe that, on their way to becoming qualitative researchers, if they would like to choose this as their future academic path, these students and I will have enhanced their/my ability to understand others, as well as themselves/myself. To me, this is the value of doing qualitative research.

**Limitation and Future Research**

This paper is only based on the first author’s QR teaching and reflection, and the limited participants in this study may lead to lack of generalizability of this study. More empirical studies are expected to focus on QR learners.

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**Notes**

1. I was a little shocked to hear that there were five cameras in the classroom and began to count. I found four on both sides of the room. I then realized that someone is always watching me lecturing from the other side of the camera.

2. The definition is to be found on [https://www.dictionary.com/e/translations/waldeinsamkeit/](https://www.dictionary.com/e/translations/waldeinsamkeit/)

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