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Performing Ethnography: From Dissonance to Resonance in Teaching Anthropology in China

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Abstract
In the *Gender, Culture, and Society* undergraduate course at a mainland Chinese university, an instructor had her students perform Emily Martin's *The Woman in the Body* (2001) to engage their own embodied experience in an anthropology class. To clarify the epistemological significance of this pedagogical innovation, the instructor engaged in a three-year dialogue with her Chinese collaborator regarding her teaching experience. This collaboratively written article drawing on one author's classroom ethnography and extensive discussions on pedagogical innovations, examines how dissonance –defined here as readers' interpretative gaps when engaging with an ethnographic text –can be transformed into resonance –readers' embodied engagement with the text – through a dramaturgical approach to teaching anthropology inspired by the work of Victor and Edith Turner, (e.g. performing ethnography). In mobilising Chinese students to perform ethnography, the frictions between the sociocultural context of the text and their own experiences were made apparent. By engaging with the text in an embodied manner, the students experienced a transformation from dissonance to resonance, and their subsequent discussions fostered reflexivity and empathy. Inspired by the Turners' theoretical framework and dramaturgically oriented pedagogy, performing ethnography constitutes one of several pedagogical innovations that are urgently needed to re-evaluate anthropological education. We posit that students' dissonance with ethnographic texts provides a foundation for pedagogical innovation. By transforming the classroom into a theatrical space –an experimental site for both ethnographic fieldwork and theoretical as well as methodological reflection –this approach contributes significantly to anthropological knowledge production.

Keywords: anthropological education; university classroom; performing ethnography; pedagogy; China

Introduction: Encountering Dissonance in Anthropology Classrooms in China

In anthropology classrooms, students often struggle to engage with ethnographies of unfamiliar cultural contexts. This challenge arises, in part, from how ethnographic work is shaped by the author's cultural repertoire and epistemological framework, which influence their choices of representation. In anthropology teaching settings across China, the dissonance between English-language ethnographies and local contexts is a persistent issue. Our pedagogical experiment stems from the first author's experience teaching the course *Gender, Culture, and Society* (hereafter *Gender*) at a mainland Chinese university during the 2020–2021 academic year. Following David Graeber's (2014) call for contemporary anthropological education to inspire students to engage with and respond to the pressing social issues of their times, the instructor of the *Gender* course recognised the critical imperative of her course, particularly as gendered conflicts over marriage, reproduction, employment, and bodily rights have been intensifying in contemporary China.

The first author selected Emily Martin's (2001) *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*, a classic work in feminist anthropology and science and technology studies, as the principal ethnography for close reading in the course. Written in the context of an American society where biomedical discourses increasingly dominated and fragmented female bodies, integrating them as mere cogs into the machinery of industrial capitalism, Martin's analysis offers critical insights into gendered power structures. This milieu resonates with the dual exploitation of women in contemporary China, where the lasting influences of patriarchy intersects with the demands of a market economy that simultaneously draws women into the labour force and compels them to conform to traditional feminine virtues and reproductive duties as wives and mothers (see Evans, 2008; Pun,

2005; Santos and Harrel, 2017; Zhao, 2022). Martin (2001, p. xi) emphasised how medical texts employed what she called "machine metaphors" to characterise women's bodies undergoing menstruation, menopause, and childbirth, "as if they were mechanical factories or centralised production systems". In her analysis, these metaphors, deeply embedded American biomedical discourse, reflected broader societal structures that mapped women's reproductive labour onto familiar forms of mass production, prioritising efficiency and large-scale output.

Although the book was written in a vivid and accessible manner, the students struggled to connect with Martin's ethnography in the United States. Not only did the Chinese students find Martin's anthropological analysis obscure, they also observed the cultural differences in knowledge transmission further impeded their understanding of the material. For example, in Chapter 5, Martin (2001) based her concept of the separation of the "self" and the "body" on existing public discourses on women's bodies and identities in America. In this chapter, she posits that "Your self is separated from your body," supported by multiple corollaries such as "Your body is something your self has to adjust to or cope with," "Your body needs to be controlled by your self," "Your body sends you signals," "Menstruation, menopause, labour, birthing, and their component stages are states you go through or things that happen to you (not actions you do)," and "Menstruation, menopause, and birth contractions are separate from the self" (pp.77-78). The concept of the separation of the self and the body was hard to understand by the Chinese students, as in their culture they could not be differentiated.

This group of students at an R1 university in China was used to reading English academic texts. Their confusion did not merely reflect issues with literal translation from English to Chinese, a common problem in anthropology classrooms at major Chinese universities, given that much of the discipline's literature was written in English, but also a difficulty in culturally translating a contingent analytic model of the relationship between the self and body as presented in Martin's ethnography.

This group of Chinese college students was not the first to report confusion with Martin's (2001) text. In the 2001 edition of her book, Martin shared a comment from a colleague in England: "I'm not sure you are aware how American all this is." (p. xxvi). This feedback echoed the sense of dissonance expressed by the Chinese students in the *Gender* class. This shows that Martin's ethnography, despite appearing to depict the universal experiences of women in industrialised societies, is deeply embedded in a unique historical, socioeconomic, and cultural context. This issue is not unique to Martin's work but recurs throughout anthropological scholarship. In anthropology classrooms, the cultural specificity of an ethnographer's epistemic framework often challenges both the students' comprehension and the instructors' teaching.

We interpret the students' difficulties in engaging with Martin's ethnography as a form of dissonance with a culturally unfamiliar text. We argue that such dissonance warrants careful pedagogical consideration, particularly for anthropologists teaching English-language ethnographies in non-English-speaking contexts. In the *Gender* course, for instance, a pressing challenge the instructor faced was to help students –steeped in different bodily cultures and metaphorical frameworks –grasp how women's bodies are currently situated within the entanglement of patriarchy, biomedicine, and capitalism as analysed by Martin. This raises the question of how to transform the dissonance between students and a culturally unfamiliar text into resonance. Beyond fostering empathetic engagement with Martin's analysis, the first author also sought to encourage critical reading grounded in the students' lived experiences, prompting them to recognise both the cultural specificity of her work and the differences between that context and their lives.

To address these challenges, we introduce the dramaturgically-oriented approach to teaching anthropology—performing ethnography—pioneered by the Turners, as a form of embodied pedagogy in anthropology classrooms. By mobilising students' bodily experiences, we sought to move beyond alterities in textual representation and foster their reflective engagement with the ethnographic work. In this paper, we treat the classroom encounter between students and an ethnographic text as a microcosm of cultural encounter, and ask: what insights could Chinese students, with their unique cultural backgrounds and life experiences, learn from an anthropological text written from fieldwork in an unfamiliar context and in English? What role can performance play in addressing this classroom challenge? Before delving into the details of performing ethnography drawn from the first author's classroom, we will first briefly discuss why pedagogical innovation is particularly crucial in anthropology classrooms in China.

Introducing Performance to Anthropology Classroom as Critical Pedagogy

Pedagogy –specifically how educators guide students into the realm of anthropological thought –has rarely been considered as a core concern within the discipline (Blum, 2019). Moreover, the potential of the classroom as an experimental site for anthropological knowledge production— encompassing both ethnographic fieldwork and theoretical and methodological reflection—remains underutilised by anthropologists who also serve as educators. However, with the rise of STEM and the concomitant marginalisation of anthropology in higher education institutions worldwide, pedagogical innovations have become both critically urgent and vital for securing the discipline's academic standing. This endeavour not only involves the re-evaluation of anthropological canons and the epistemological biases they perpetuate but also requires anthropologists to foster in-depth dialogues with students from diverse backgrounds. Consequently, attending to the dissonance that students bring to the classroom may provide a valuable starting point for transforming pedagogical practices and reconfiguring classrooms into experimental and critical sites of knowledge production.

For decades –or even centuries –Chinese students have been accustomed to highly normalised classrooms characterised by strict teacher control. Historically, the dominant pedagogy in China, which overly revers the classics and their authoritative interpretations, has been suffused with patriarchal and hierarchical overtones. Lee (2000, pp.604-605) argues that this educational model either produced individuals who uncritically accepted established doctrines or cultivated intellectuals who struggled to navigate the complexities of the real world, ultimately seeking refuge in the literary domain. Both outcomes contributed to perpetuating and reinforcing the imperial rule, as the imperial examination system further emphasised students' ability to replicate established formats and genres. The pervasive examination-oriented culture in the contemporary elite selection systems of China serves as a modern variant of the imperial examination system, effectively reducing knowledge to a technical instrument for achieving worldly success (Bregnbæk, 2016). From elementary school to universities, educational institutions are saturated with instrumentalist teaching and learning practices designed to inundate students with the "key points" of textbooks to enable them to achieve high scores (Howlett, 2021).

The educational model in China, from antiquity to the present (Bregnbaek, 2016; Chiang, 2022; Zhang, 2019) has fostered a dominant perception of knowledge acquisition among students, one that emphasises the uncritical acceptance of textual authority and the institutional structures that uphold it. However, essential skills in anthropological training, such as reflexivity, empathy, and experiential sensitivity, are most effectively cultivated through embodied learning (Singleton et.al, 2022; Spencer, 2011). Despite growing advocacy for embodied pedagogies, concrete examples and implementable strategies remain limited. A notable exception is Kuehling's (2014) innovative use of simulation games in anthropology classrooms, which has been shown to enhance comprehension, empathy, and critical thinking.

To challenge the rigid, disciplinary structures of conventional Chinese classrooms and introduce embodied pedagogy in a practicable manner, the first author drew inspiration from the dramaturgical approach to teaching and learning that she encountered in courses taught by Edith Turner at the University of Virginia. As a graduate of the university's Anthropology Department, she had also served as a teaching assistant for Edith's "*Anthropology of Spirituality"* course in the spring of 2015. In this role, she not only supported classroom instruction but also assisted in the preparation of Turner's dramaturgically-oriented teaching methods. Each Thursday evening, she would drive Edith to class, collecting various stage props –such as drums and masks –from her home upon request. This experience provided her with first-hand exposure to an embodied, performance-based approach to pedagogy, which distinguished Turner's classes from those of her peers at the university.

As part of the preparatory process for in-class performance, Edith Turner and the first author assigned each student a role based on a character from the selected ethnographic text and guided them in adapting the text into a script. At times, they facilitated multiple rounds of table reads before the formal performances. The enactments often led to humorous moments, such as when the TA was declared "married" to a student during the performance of a wedding ceremony from the text. These dramatic elements underscored the unique affective appeal of performing ethnography as a pedagogical innovation, as the boundary between performance and reality blurred with the breakdown of the "fourth wall". In addition to overseeing the performances, Edith Turner and her TA also facilitated post-performance discussions, encouraging students to reflect critically on their embodied engagement with the ethnographic material.

Decades before Edith led her TA and students in performing the rituals documented in the course readings, she and Victor Turner (1982) had first experimented with drama students at NYU, guiding them in enacting Central

African and Afro-Brazilian rituals. These performances were "aided by drummers drawn from the appropriate cultures or related cultures," which, in turn, encouraged the Turners to "experiment further at the University of Virginia with the rendering of ethnography in a kind of instructional theatre" (p.41). Throughout their teaching careers, the Turners frequently incorporated drama into their classrooms and wrote extensively about their experiences teaching students to "perform ethnography" (Turner and Turner, 1982). Their objective was not to train students as professional actors for public entertainment but rather to immerse them in the cultural contexts they were studying. In this sense, drama functioned as both a method and tool for teaching anthropology, allowing students "to put experiential flesh on these cognitive bones" (Turner and Turner, 1982, p.41).

The Turners (1982) argued that emphasising the performance of cultural differences might obscure the commonalities shared among cultures while presenting what appears "exotic" may foster prejudice by "stressing the otherness of the other" (p.42). They provided the following recommendations for performing ethnography in classrooms:

> Let us focus first on what all people share, the social drama form, from which emerge all types of cultural performance, which, in their turn, subtly stylize the contours of social interaction in everyday life. In practice, this means setting apart a substantial block of time to familiarize students with the culture and social system of the group whose dramas they will enact…The resultant instructional form could be a kind of synthesis between an anthropological seminar and a postmodern theatrical workshop. (Turner and Turner, 1982, p.42)

The Turners' dramaturgically oriented pedagogy was theoretically underpinned by the anthropology of experience they had been developing. They contended that relying solely on the reading of written texts "kowtows to the cognitive dominance of written matter and relies upon the arbitrariness of the connection between the penned or printed sign and its meaning" (Turner and Turner, 1982, p.41). In their view, theatrical performance in the classroom should prioritise the social drama over aesthetic drama. Regarding the interplay between these two forms of drama, Victor Turner states,

> [S]ocial dramas, 'dramas of living,' as Kenneth Burke calls them, can be aptly studied as having four phases. These I label breach, crisis, redress, and either reintegration or recognition of schism. Social dramas occur within groups of persons who share values and interests and who have a real or alleged common history. (Turner, 1980, p.149)

Victor Turner (1980, p.144) further interprets social drama as "a spontaneous unit of social process and a fact of everyone's experience in every human society." He suggests that the dramatic nature of human experience can be conveyed through various narrative forms, thereby cultivating various dimensions of reflexivity (Turner, 1980, pp.156-7, 166-7).

The Turners' work on performance resonates with Conquergood's (1991) research which conceptualises performance as a supplementary form of research publication and an alternative means of (re)presenting ethnographic findings. Performing ethnography not only facilitates readers' comprehension of the text but also creates opportunities for dialogue between the reader and the text (Conquergood, 1985). Through performance, individuals form an embodied relationship with the text, thereby rejecting the analytical distance inherent in traditional text-based learning (Conquergood, 1998, p.26).

Performance-sensitive approaches privilege what Conquergood (1998, p.27) describes as an "experiential, participatory epistemology", promoting learners' active engagement with the immediacy of the learning context. This epistemology is reflected in the Chinese term *ti hui*（体会）, where *ti* denotes the use of the body or embodiment and *hui* comprehension or understanding. As the term implies, *ti hui* refers to a form of learning achieved through embodied involvement. In this context, performance can be seen as a practice of *ti hui*, allowing participants –both performers and audiences –to become vulnerable to their own experiences and those of others (Behar, 1996, p.3). Consequently, a performance legitimises itself not through the citation of scholarly texts but through its capacity to evoke shared feelings and experiences (Denzin, 2003, p.13).

The first author, instructor of the *Gender* course, revised the Turnerian pedagogy of performing ethnography by transposing the cultural context of the ethnographic work into that of the student performers. When students prepared their "playscript" (Turner and Turner, 1982), the instructor did not require strict adherence to the original text regarding characters, scenes, storylines, or dialogue and actions. Instead, she encouraged them to adapt the text in ways that resonated with their own experiences. By reworking the ethnographic text into their own scripts, students were afforded the opportunity to engage in cultural comparison and develop cultural

reflexivity, while avoiding the reduction of the lived experiences of others to mere objects of observation or fetishisation.

Furthermore, encouraging students to infuse as much creativity as possible into the adaptation process reveals the potential of performing ethnography as a form of engaged pedagogy, as advocated by bell hooks (1994). In her discussion of the core tenets of "engaged pedagogy", hooks posits that students struggle to absorb abstract messages that are disconnected from their own lives, whereas the most valuable learning experiences arise from critical and analytical reflection on the world they inhabit. Script adaptation, therefore, serves as an effective means for connecting students' lived experiences with the ethnographic text. In contrast to traditional pedagogy –often modelled on a "banking" metaphor that privileges the instructor's authoritative interpretation and positions students as passive recipients of knowledge –engaged pedagogy emphasises that knowledge is co-constructed through mutual engagement between the instructor, as a traditional authority figure, and the lived realities and personal experiences of the students (hooks, 1994, p.83-84). Moreover, by adapting and performing a piece of ethnography produced in a different sociocultural context, students actively embark on cross-cultural comparisons, thereby acquiring anthropological insights through an embodied, reflexive, and critical learning process rather than through the imposition of knowledge by the instructor (see also Pedelty, 2001).

In the following pages, we provide an ethnographic account of how an "instructional theatre" (Turner and Turner, 1982) was created through students' performing ethnography in an anthropology classroom at a Chinese university.

Turning the Classroom into a Theatre

Group Enactments

The chapters of Martin's (2001, p.71-180) book adapted and performed by the students were drawn from Part Three "*Women's Vantage Point*.". Drawing on rich ethnographic materials from interviews with urban middle-class and working-class women of diverse races and ages in America, these six chapters illuminate ordinary American women's experiences and reflections on their bodies as they navigate menstruation, childbirth, and menopause. Class sessions were structured into three distinct phases: (1) pre-performance preparation; (2) theatrical performance; (3) post-performance review and discussion. The instructor grouped the students according to Martin's organisation of chapters (see Figure 1).

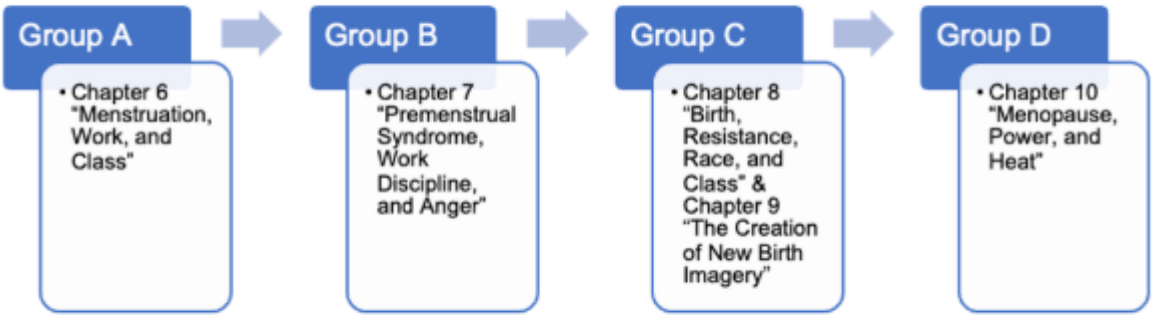

Figure 1 Arrangement of Group Performances Corresponding to Martin's Chapters

Although the first author was fortunate to teach at an R1 university in China, the teaching environment did not provide the necessary conditions to implement all of the Turners'(1982) specific recommendations –for example, procuring costumes, masks, and props, creating stage settings, or even inviting a member of the studied group or an individual with fieldwork experience as a dramaturg or director (p. 41). In the following sections, we offer detailed descriptions of the performances of Groups A, B, and D.

Resetting the Text in Familiar Scenes

In Chapter 6 of her book, Martin (2001) introduces "the general cultural model" of menstruation, whereby American women are portrayed as not regarding menstruation "as a private function" confined to the domestic sphere, "but as inextricable from the rest of life at work and school" (p.91). Acknowledging that working- and middle-class women might deal with such a general model in American culture in different ways, Martin (2001) continues to state,

> The closest women come to talking about menstruation as a function that belongs in the private realm is when they describe it as a 'hassle.' What makes it a 'hassle' has numerous dimensions…But because women are aware that in our general cultural view menstruation is dirty, they are still stuck with the "hassle": most centrally no one must ever see you dealing with the mechanics of keeping up with the mess from showing on your clothes, furniture, or the floor. But the problems arise precisely where menstruation does not belong, according to our cultural categories: in the realms of work and school outside the home. The "hassle" refers to the host of practical difficulties involved in getting through the day of menstruating, given the way our time and space are organized in schools and places of work (p.42)

In response to this conceptualisation, Group A's theatrical performance vividly illustrated how the "hassle" of menstruation conflicts with the organisation of public time and space. Notably, Martin's interview transcripts reveal that working women encounter specific difficulties in environments such as factories and offices –settings that many college students may find unfamiliar. Given that students are generally more acquainted with the dynamics of school environments, Group A recontextualised the performance by setting it in a Chinese middle school. Through this adaptation, the group effectively showcased the menstrual challenges experienced by adolescent girls in schools within a context that resonated with the students' own lived experiences.

Here is a thick description of Group A's performance. In a physical education (PE) class, male and female students were separated into different areas to engage in distinct activities. During the session, a female student discovered upon returning from the bathroom that she was menstruating. Flushed, she gestured to her peers, requesting that they check for any bloodstains on her trousers. Initially, her gesture went unnoticed until one girl discerned its meaning, exclaiming, "Oh, you are having your period!" The audience heard this remark, and the girl quickly covered her mouth to lower her voice, thereby preventing the male students from overhearing. In response, several girls whispered among themselves, asking, "Did you bring a pad with you?" "Are you feeling okay?" "Should we tell the teacher?" "Should you go back to the classroom and rest?" Meanwhile, the male students, who were engaged in a basketball game, looked towards the "playground" (projected on a screen) with expressions of confusion. The female PE teacher approached the girls' section and inquired about the disruption. The affected student, with her head bowed and voice trembling, replied, "I am not feeling well." Recognising the situation, the teacher gently asked whether she had brought a pad and where she would prefer to rest.

After the class concluded, the students returned to the "classroom" (also projected on a screen). The affected student quietly asked a nearby friend if she could borrow a pad as a precaution. Her friend indicated a drawer beneath her desk, reassuring her friend that a supply was available. In a discreet manner, the friend inserted a pad into her right sleeve and wrapped her arm around the borrower, who swiftly retrieved the pad from her friend's sleeve so as not to attract attention. During another break between classes, several girls planned to go to the bathroom together, holding hands as they walked. Suddenly, the affected student informed her friends that she would be back shortly. She then left and hurried to a convenience store (projected on a screen), where she promptly gathered pads of various sizes and brands, displaying them on a checkout counter adapted from a desk. The checkout clerk, using her phone as a prop, scanned each item rapidly and then asked, "Do you need a dark plastic bag?" The student responded assertively, "Yes, auntie, please!" nodding her head in affirmation.

During the post-performance discussion, several female students remarked enthusiastically that the scene depicting teenage girls holding hands as they walked to the school bathrooms resonated deeply with their personal experiences. They remarked with laughter, "Isn't this something of Chinese characteristics?" Moreover,

the practice of using a dark plastic bag to conceal sanitary pads was noted as a common strategy among young women, aligning with Martin's observation that women feel embarrassed to bring the "messy," private matter of menstruation into public view. This moment of resonance underscores the notion that any visual indication of menstruation is deemed inappropriate for public display, whether intentionally or not.

Although such adaptation and re-enactment might appear, at times, to deviate from Martin's original text, it can be argued that the students' performance effectively conveyed how the tacit knowledge surrounding women's menstruation was shared, thereby fostering understanding, empathy, and mutual support among adolescent girls. The ways in which women in productive spheres—such as factory production lines and corporate cubicles—support one another during menstruation, were reinterpreted in the performance as teenage girls caring for a peer who was "not feeling well" during a PE class at a Chinese middle school. By recontextualising the ethnographic text within familiar settings, the students' performance underscored a key message of Martin's work: modern, industrial society imposes rigid restrictions by transplanting the norms of the public, productive sphere into the private domain, resulting in bodily "hassles" on women's "inconvenient days."

Embodying the Invisible from the Text

Martin's ethnography predominantly features women's voices as they recount their experiences and emotions, with men's perspectives appearing only rarely. Some interviewees even spoke on behalf of their husbands, recalling instances when they were visibly down amid the morning rush of preparing breakfast and getting children ready for school. In one account, a woman half-jokingly explained that her husband had observed a decline in his work performance on predictable days each month, presumably corresponding to when she was menstruating and challenging him at home (Martin, 2001, pp.92-138). Although Martin's focus on women resulted in the everyday experiences of men being largely absent, this group of Chinese college students successfully illuminated what had remained invisible in her text through both their performance and reflective discussions.

During the post-performance discussion following Group A's enactment, students observed the gendered division of space and exercise portrayed in the performance, a dynamic reminiscent of their own middle-school experiences. Both female and male students questioned whether middle-school boys could decipher the tacit signals exchanged among female peers regarding menstruation. One female student even queried a male classmate, "When you were in middle school, could you tell that one girl was checking another's trousers for a blood stain, or that a girl was discreetly passing a pad to a friend during a hug?" Overall, Group A's performance highlighted intra-gender interactions–how a group of middle-school girls shared implicit knowledge, expressed empathy, and cooperated. Whereas Group B's adaptation of Chapter 7 on premenstrual syndrome (PMS) underscored inter-gender interactions by situating the scene within a Chinese university.

Group B's performance unfolded as follows. Two senior students, a couple, were preparing for job interviews, when the female student suddenly experienced severe cramps while reciting answers to hypothetical interview questions posed by her boyfriend during a mock interview. The young man noticed her lowering her head onto the desk and placing a hand on her midsection, intermittently murmuring "ah, cramp." In an attempt to help, he fetched a glass of hot water, only to be met with exasperated complaint, "You only know 'drinking more hot water'!" He frowned and walked away with the water. Later, as her cramps subsided, she explained to him the physical, behavioural, psychological, and emotional symptoms of PMS, explicitly referencing "Table 1 A List of the Symptoms of Premenstrual Syndrome from a Popular Handbook" in Martin (2001, p.114). After a brief silence, he apologised, saying, "I am sorry that I did not realise your body was enduring so much discomfort, and that I cannot fully empathise. I have symptoms of being a straight man." This remark, echoing a popular Chinese slang that satirises straight men's perceived insensitivity toward women's experiences, elicited laughter from both the actors and the audience.

Responding to Group B's use of the PMS symptom list as ethnographic material, students in the post-performance discussion questioned whether presenting such a list might inadvertently medicalise women's menstruating bodies. One female student argued,

> I think it is dangerous to present PMS as if it is a real thing, attributing a so-called monster inside a woman's body when she behaves in unexpected ways, as seen in some of Martin's interviews. If we medicalise a condition that many women may not consider significant, men might come to assume that all expressions of emotions in women are due to PMS, thereby dismissing their reasonable concerns.

Another female student concurred, sharing that her boyfriend would often ask if "it was that time of the month" whenever she appeared overly "emotional." Some students also noted the detail of the boyfriend offering a bottle of hot water during the scene, linking it to a piece of traditional Chinese medical knowledge. They observed that, according to local beliefs, hot water is thought to alleviate various discomforts including stomach aches, colds, and menstrual cramps. One student commented, "Hot water might work for us, given that our bodies are different from those of American women," thus invoking the notion of local biology.

Cultivating Reflexivity and Empathy

Beyond the intra- and inter-gender interactions demonstrated by previous groups, Group D's performance of Chapter 10 on menopause emphasised intergenerational relationships among women, particularly the complex dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship. The following description provides a detailed account of Group D's performance.

In Scene I, Group D projected an image of a dimly lit office room on the screen, where a middle-aged woman, Alida, was working late. Alida was seen frequently shifting her gaze between her computer screen and the stack of paperwork before her. With a furrowed brow and a sigh, she remarked, "Tomorrow's presentation is very important because it will determine whether I will get a promotion and make a better life for me and my daughter."

In Scene II, an image of a kitchen was projected on a screen as Alida prepared breakfast, intermittently yawning and lamenting, "I am still so tired, with only four hours of sleep last night." Her daughter burst into the scene, snatched the sandwich that Alida had just plated, and hurriedly grabbed her coat from a stack of hanging clothes –a prop provided by the students. At that moment, the stack collapsed as the daughter shouted, "Our school bus is here and I don't have time!" Left alone in the kitchen amid scattered clothes, Alida discarded the spatula from her hand and launched into a brief monologue. She recalled raising her daughter on her own after her divorce –a journey that was often marked by emotional distance, particularly during her daughter's rebellious teenage years. As her body began to tremble, Alida massaged her forehead with her right hand, signalling a headache, one of the menopausal symptoms reported by Martin's interviewees. "I cannot lose myself. I need to stay calm because there is an important meeting coming up," she murmured before leaving for work.

In Scene III, a picture of a corporate conference room was projected on the screen. Alida was pitching a project to colleagues and clients when suddenly, a wave of hot flushes overcame her. Visible perspiration and a flushed face made it difficult for her to grasp the microphone, and she fidgeted noticeably. Embarrassed, she paused momentarily, cleared her throat, and resumed her presentation. Following the meeting, her male boss questioned her about the disruption. "Nothing", she replied, "I just got nervous. I apologise, and I hope everything went well." Once her boss departed, Alida reflected inwardly, "They must think it was a mistake to assign an important task to a middle-aged woman."

In Scene IV, Alida called her friend Beth, who invited her to visit her home –a setting represented by a projection of an urban, middle-class living room. Alida vented her menopausal symptoms to Beth, exclaiming, "I cannot work, or deal with my daughter. And I am ALWAYS so exhausted!" Beth offered comfort by noting that she felt more vibrant and confident during menopause, suggesting that it could signal the start of a new life, "because it saves you all the trouble of menstruation and the worries of pregnancy," Alida smiled at this perspective. In the final scenes, Alida received news from her boss that her company had won the pitch. Upon returning home from work, she found her daughter waiting to chat, and the concluding lines of the script "And Alida starts dating. Perhaps, menopause is the real start of a woman's life," were projected on the screen.

Compared to the other groups, Group D's adaptation remained relatively faithful to Martin's original ethnographic accounts by drawing directly on interviews about women's embodied experiences at home and at work during menopause. Their dramatic rendition of the text stimulated critical, reflexive discussion by interweaving the voices of Martin's interlocutors with their own perspectives. During the post-performance discussion, several students reflected on their personal experiences, citing their own mothers who were undergoing menopause. One student commented, "Now that I think of the morning conflicts with my mother, I cannot help but feel for her," Another observed, "My mother has not retired yet, and I now understand that she must be shouldering a great deal of pressure and burden at work and home. Watching this performance has made me want to show her even more empathy and love,"

By performing the bodies of women at ages different than their own and transposing the sociocultural context of an ethnographic text into their lives, students not only cultivated resonance with the text but also developed reflexivity and empathy in their personal experiences.

Discussion

As anthropology gains popularity in Chinese higher education institutions, instructors increasingly encounter students' dissonance with ethnographies composed in English and set in unfamiliar sociocultural contexts. Many Chinese instructors, cautious of reinforcing Western intellectual dominance, resist using texts from English-speaking academia and instead pursue a "Chinese" version of anthropology (Kipnis, 2021; Steinmüller, 2022). Such caution, however, can lead to the outright rejection of English-language ethnographies, potentially sacrificing the cross-cultural comparative perspective that is central to the discipline. Rather than steering students away from these texts, we contend that the tension between the ethnographic text's context being taught and students' lived experiences should be embraced as a productive space for engaging with the "afterlife" of ethnography (Fassin, 2015). This article draws on the first author's classroom ethnography from an anthropology course at a Chinese university, where the Turnerian pedagogy of performing ethnography was employed. It demonstrates how students transformed their initial dissonance with the ethnographic text into resonance through embodied engagement and critical reflection.

Our paper offers an example of embodied pedagogy and experiential learning –practices promoted by anthropologists of education and rooted in the Chinese cultural tradition of learning through *ti hui*. This classroom-turned-theatre dynamic subverts the traditional Chinese classroom, where students once looked up to the instructor and accepted authoritarian interpretations of classical texts. Instead, students now share their embodied interpretations among peers. Consequently, the traditional vertical transmission of knowledge from instructor to student has evolved into a horizontal sphere in which understanding, reflexivity, and empathy are collectively cultivated through performing ethnography. Through adaptation, performance, and collective deliberation, the students were invited to centre their embodied experiences and express the ethnographic insights in their own bodily language and cultural vocabulary, rather than merely replicating the detached language of the original text.

The affective resonance elicited by these performances illustrates the distinct power of embodied pedagogy compared to traditional, text-centred teaching. The shared moments of empathetic engagement between the actors and the audience were palpable. For instance, when a student portraying a boyfriend on stage advised his girlfriend to "drink hot water" to alleviate menstrual pain, or when another group reenacted the awkwardness of managing menstruation during a PE class, these dramatised scenarios prompted knowing laughter and collective reflection. This resonance also led to deeper discussions, as seen in the audience's exploration of mother-child dynamics following Group D's performance. The instructor underscored the tensions students experienced between the ethnographic text's sociocultural context and their own lived realities. We contend that it was only when this dissonance was made visible and dramatised through embodied performance that students could engage in critical reflection.

Furthermore, students in the first author's anthropology classroom were encouraged to conduct cross-cultural comparisons that examined the similarities and differences in women's bodily experiences within American and Chinese sociocultural contexts. Anthropological literature (e.g. Farquhar, 2020; Kuriyama, 2002; Strathern, 1994) has consistently demonstrated that perceptions of the body and the relationship between the self and body vary widely across societies, leading to markedly different "metaphors we live by" (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003). The dissonance experienced by the Chinese students in the *Gender* course highlights how the self-body separation in Martin's ethnography is deeply embedded in the Western "mind-body dichotomy"—a notion that is not universally applicable in non-Western contexts. By integrating local knowledge about the body and its relationship to the self, the students enriched their cross-cultural engagement with and critical reflection on the text.

By conducting a cross-cultural comparison through the lens of performing ethnography in the classroom, this group of Chinese students inverted the typical West-versus-rest framework prevalent in anthropology classrooms at Euro-American universities. Whereas students in Euro-American institutions are taught to "make the strange familiar, make the familiar strange" by reading ethnographies that depict lives different from their own, the Chinese students in our study approached cross-cultural comparison in the opposite direction by regarding the American women in Martin's ethnography as the "other". We should note that such cross-cultural comparison was not based

on essentialising the differences between the United States and China, or between American and Chinese women; rather it encouraged them to draw on their own experiences to foster empathetic understanding of the perspectives represented in the ethnographic text.

Cultivating empathy among college students is particularly significant in the context of global pandemics and escalating geopolitical tensions. By enacting the bodily experiences of American women depicted in the ethnography, the Chinese students realised that women across different societies may share similar physical experiences despite cultural variations. Engaging with the "other" through embodied performance not only deepened their understanding of the ethnographic subjects but also enabled them to reflect on their own lives. Martin (2001) signalled a pivotal shift in anthropology as scholars began turning their analytical gaze toward their own societies. Similarly, performing ethnography in the classroom prompts students to explore the lived experiences and immediate realities of themselves and those around them –what Xiang (2021) terms the "nearby" (*fu jin*, 附近). The students' creative reinterpretation of the original ethnography emerged from their careful observation of this "nearby", thereby fostering reflexivity.

Conclusion

Beyond fostering empathetic engagement with both the text and real life, the affective responses elicited by performances and subsequent discussions illuminate the moral and educational potential of the classroom as theatre. The Turners' perspective –that performance effectively cultivates reflexivity –resonates with Nussbaum's (2009) analysis of the role Greek tragedies played in ancient Greek civil life. Nussbaum (2009) contends that the plays performed at civic festivals provided opportunities for communal ethical deliberation; citizens in amphitheatres were not merely observing detached historical events but were witnessing dramatic representations of everyday situations that mirrored their own experiences. As Nussbaum (2009, p.231) notes, "the witnessing of a play was an occasion for solemn civic deliberation." Similarly, Mattingly (2016, p.120) argued in *Moral Laboratories* that ordinary people are both "actors," and spectators in their own dramatic lives, deliberating on the social conditions of their circumstances and exploring potential remedies. In this light, performing, observing, and discussing dramas adapted from ethnography in the classroom encourages students to reflect critically on the choices they might make when confronting real-world situations similar to those depicted in the texts.

This article has explored performing ethnography as an engaged and critical form of pedagogical innovation, linking the traditional Chinese concept of *ti hui* with contemporary anthropological discussions on embodied pedagogy and experiential learning (Kuehling, 2014; Singleton et.al, 2022; Spencer, 2011). By challenging conventional instructional paradigms in Chinese universities and reimagining students' learning experiences, this study highlights the transformative potential of a dramaturgically oriented approach to teaching anthropology. We argue that when students –who inhabit sociocultural contexts different from that of the text –perform ethnography, they not only contribute to embodied pedagogy and experiential learning but also cultivate reflexivity and empathy. Future research could further explore the constructive potential of performing ethnography, not only as a means of innovative pedagogy but also as a tool for cross-cultural comparison.

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